Ellora's Cave Presents
Sylvia Day
Kiss of the Night

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Kiss of the Night

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KISS OF THE NIGHT

Sylvia Day

Dedication

This story is dedicated to my fabulous editor, Briana St. James, after whom my heroine is named. She pushes me to reach a little deeper, and in doing so, she makes the stories I share with you better. Thanks, Bree.

Chapter One

Alex Night's entire body hummed with anticipation as the lovely blonde cut through the crowded lounge and headed directly toward him. The dancing throng parted for the tiny woman without protest, her presence so compelling it demanded respect and received it without question.

A moment ago, the popular band had held his complete attention. Now his keen hearing tuned out the music and focused instead on the steady, rhythmic tapping of her high-heeled boots upon the vented steel floor. Dressed in a black bio-suit that hid her rank, Representative Briana Michaels had forgone her customary tight chignon in favor of soft, shoulder-length curls. She'd made no overt attempt to mask her famous features, but the difference wrought by her clothing and hair was remarkable enough that she went unrecognized by everyone but him.

She looked harmless enough, cute actually, if one failed to note the blaster strapped to her thigh. A newer model gun, by the look of it. Briana was a deadly beauty with a razor-sharp mind—a potent combination for a man like Alex.

Proceeding with the mission when the brain in charge was between his legs broke every protocol in the database. But then Alex wasn't known for following protocol, which was why he'd been chosen to handle such a delicate undercover assignment to begin with. Failure was not an option and the Special Task Force wanted an agent who would go the distance, using whatever means necessary. Alex had been their first choice and when he learned Briana Michaels was the target, he'd leapt at the opportunity.

Rolling a small, cylindrical data chip between his palm and the cool metal table, Alex kept his eye on his mission as she swayed toward him with slender hips and narrowed green eyes. The press loved to portray Briana as a woman whose passions

were incited only by political debate, but Alex saw untapped sexual passion in her full red lips and arrogantly arched brow. Just looking at her heated his blood and made his jaw ache.

He closed his eyes and savored her smell—spicy but a bit tart. *Oh yes.* He'd been spot on, as usual. Chief Donny swore a man couldn't tell a damn thing about anyone from watching them on a vid unit, but Alex knew better. A vamp didn't reach 223 years of age and not learn how to read women.

"Taking a nap, Captain Night?"

Ummm… Her voice was divine too. Just the right side of prim with a raspy inflection.

He'd been in lust with the powerful politician from the moment he first saw her on the vid comm. Her endorsement of vampiric rights and controversial medical research that could lead to reproductive capability in vampires intrigued him. But the reality of her physical presence was far more alluring than any monitor could portray. He was attracted to her convictions and political fearlessness, but when such admirable traits were packaged in a body like that…

Ah, hell. He wanted her bad.

"If you prefer," she continued. "I can hire another smuggler to perform the tasks I require."

Alex raised his lids slowly and lounged deeper into the bar booth. His fingers curled around the data chip and then slipped it into the chained holder he wore around his neck. "Ah, sweetness. I'm more than willing to perform in any way you desire."

"I bet." Briana slipped into the booth across from him, her long legs brushing against his, causing a deeper sensual awareness. She flipped open a comm link and spun it around so he could see the split screen.

"Duncan Chiles and Mitchell Sandoval," he said, eyeing the relay. From the looks of it, the other men were seated in the same bar. They were waiting for Briana to make her appearance, just like he had been. He schooled his face to remain impassive while

inside he admired her initiative. However, he couldn't allow her to hire them. Unlike Alex, they were criminals. "Very good smugglers. But not the best, which is why you need me."

"Yes, I'd heard your skill was matched only by your ego. Having witnessed one, I'm suitably impressed by the other."

He laughed. She would be fun, in more ways than one.

"One hundred thousand credits," Alex said, getting straight to the point so they could go straight to his ship. The bar was packed and the band played too loudly for a proper seduction. It wouldn't be easy to woo her into his bed. He'd have to finesse her properly and that took time. An impatient man by nature, he was eager to get started.

She arched a dark blonde eyebrow and his heart rate picked up. "Fifty."

"You're out of your mind," he scoffed. "To get you to Simgan 2 without hitting any checkpoints will force us to go through the Ligerian Ice Field, Federation space and the Council's largest waste dump. One hundred thousand is a steal."

"Seventy-five."

He straightened, relishing the barter. She was gutsy for a human. "One hundred."

"Eighty or I'm hiring Sandoval."

"Ninety and you have a deal."

She laced her fingers on the tabletop. "Eighty-five."

Alex laughed again. "Eighty-five and a half."

"Done." Briana smiled and for the first time in many decades he momentarily lost the ability to think.

Her seat as Interstellar Rep of the entire Delta Quadrant, the largest quadrant in Council territory, made any hint of softness a weakness she could ill afford and Alex understood that. She rarely smiled and never laughed, but he liked the challenge she presented. He would elicit the gamut of emotions from her during the flight to her homeworld and enjoy every moment of it.

She slid the comm link over. “Enter your info and I’ll pay you now.”

Once he’d done as she asked, he held out his hand to seal the agreement, an ancient practice he employed simply to touch her. She hesitated and then slipped her hand into his. Alex savored the moment. With a simple touch, he could sense the rapid beating of her heart and her quickened breathing. He felt the steadiness of her grip and the dryness of her palms.

The highly esteemed politician was aroused, but not surprised to be. In fact, he suspected she liked the feeling. Maybe she even liked him.

Without releasing her, he asked, “Can I ask why you prefer to sneak into your own quadrant rather than take the more efficient and comfortable diplomatic route?”

“You can ask. Doesn’t mean I’ll answer.”

“I’d like to know what I’m risking my neck for.”

She pulled her hand away, her fingertips drifting across his palm. Her eyelids lowered, shuttering her thoughts. “Maybe I’m just avoiding the press. Taking a break.”

“While the House is in session?” he asked dubiously.

Briana turned her head and said nothing.

Alex drummed his fingers atop the table to ease the tingling her touch had left behind. “I don’t like the media either, but it would take a hell of a lot more than a need for privacy to make me risk death.”

“Ah yes,” she purred dryly, shooting him an amused glance. “About eighty-five thousand credits.”

“And a beautiful woman,” he added.

“My PA warned me about you.” She breathed an exasperated sigh that did nothing to distract him from her blush. “He should be here in a moment, once he sends Sandoval and Chiles on their way. Then we can get out of here.”

“Wait a minute. No one mentioned two passengers.”

She arched that brow again and his cock twitched with interest. “I never travel anywhere without my assistant.”

He scowled. “I have a perfectly acceptable unit on the ship.”

“James has all of my preferences and contacts programmed,” she argued, as she snapped the comm link closed and bent over to tuck it in the thigh pocket of her bio-suit.

“I don’t care if—”

The sudden flare of blaster fire lit up their booth and left a gaping hole in the back of Briana’s seat. Exactly where she’d been sitting just a split-second before.

“*What the hell*?” Alex leapt from his seat and placed himself between Briana and the rest of the room. The music continued without pause, the majority of the lounge occupants paying no attention to the danger in their midst. He scanned the room quickly, using both his eyes and his instincts. He detected nothing at all, no touch of malice or wicked intent, which couldn’t be correct. If it was, they were in a hell of a lot more trouble than he’d like to admit.

Reaching a hand behind him, he was relieved to feel her returning grip. “Jump on,” he ordered. His free hand held the hilt of his laser sword, ready to deflect another shot. She crawled onto his back, her lithe thighs gripping his waist with easy strength, her full breasts pressed tightly against him. If he weren’t so concerned, he’d have a hard-on. “Hang tight.”

He leapt over the dancers, landing first on the bar before lunging out the swinging door to the darkened night outside.

Thieves’ Cove was a frightening city for most respectable citizens, but Alex had been working undercover here for most of the last decade. He knew the maze of back alleys as well as he knew the curves of a woman’s body, and that was saying something.

The cool night air flowed over them, ruffling his hair and hers. In the distance, various sounds fought for dominance—the sounds of music, laughter, shouting. Sounds

of the city. But Alex was aware only of Briana and the lush weight of her body on his back. She remained silent throughout the journey even though he knew the speed with which he moved would disorient any human.

It was dark with only the stars to light their way. He could see perfectly, jumping over discarded crates and waste with ease, but a human wouldn't be able to see his hand in front of his face. Despite this and the fact that he was a stranger to her, when he searched her mind, Alex found that Briana was unafraid. She was as tough as the media claimed and Alex didn't find that intimidating in the slightest. In fact, the longer he knew her, the more he liked her.

It took only moments to reach the private docking bay where his early-model Starwing waited. He set her on her feet and rounded on her. "Are you alright?" His gaze raked her from head to toe.

She nodded.

"You mind explaining what just happened?"

Swallowing hard, Briana met his gaze without flinching. "What's to explain?"

Probing her mind, Alex sensed minor evasiveness but no intent to deceive. "Someone just came damn close to killing you." He grabbed her elbow and led her up the cargo ramp into the belly of his ship, wanting her inside where it was safe.

"I noticed that," she said with only a tiny waver in her voice. "And I'm used to it. I'm not a very popular person, if you hadn't noticed."

"*Mistress!*"

They both turned, Alex with his sword at the ready. He gaped at the sight that greeted him. Striding toward them was a man about his height, though not nearly as large, with gleaming blond hair and bright blue eyes.

"*That's* your PA?" Alex snapped. "It looks like a sex droid."

"Well…" she hedged.

He turned his head to stare at her. "You've got to be kidding me."

"What?" she grumbled defensively, a soft pink flush sweeping over her cheekbones. "Have you seen the latest personal assistants? They look like accountants. I have to work with him all day. Why make him hard on the eyes?"

"Is that all he's hard on?"

Alex sank his fangs into his lower lip as self-punishment for letting that comment slip out, but he couldn't have helped it if he tried. Sharing the lovely Representative with a sex droid / PA was not his idea of a good time. She deserved better.

"That's none of your business!" she retorted, hands her hips.

He leaned over her, his nostrils flaring. "It is when it's on my ship."

"Then I'll commission another ship."

"Go ahead!"

Her mouth fell open and then she snapped it shut. "I will!" She stormed back down the ramp.

"Your stubbornness is going to get you shot," he called after her. *Like he'd ever let that happen*.

She ignored him, but drew her blaster from its holster, her grip steady and light. Briana Michaels knew how to defend herself, a fact Alex carefully filed away for future examination.

He waited until the heel of her boot hit the bay, and then he closed his eyes and released his Calling. He sent it out slowly, seductively, like the ripples on a lake. Soothing her first, he then turned up the heat, revealing a bit of his desire and attraction to lure her back to him.

He could hide what he was doing, make her think the urge to return to him originated with her, but instead, Alex caressed her with his essence, steeped her with it so there was no doubt in her mind that he wanted her back. He sensed the moment she became aware of him, felt the answering spark of lust and he smiled.

"That's unfair," she muttered as she spun about. She glared at him a moment and then stomped past him into the ship. By *her* will, not his. "There should be a law against vampires who look like you."

Staring after her, Alex licked his fangs and admired the curve of her ass until she disappeared from sight.

"Thank you," said James as it came to a halt next to him.

"For what?"

"For saving her life. She was frightened."

One of the things he disliked about droids was the implant that allowed them to monitor the thoughts of their owners in real time. Sure, it increased their efficiency, but at what cost to privacy? Droids could be stolen and the information they carried could be accessed.

"I'll take care of her," Alex said sharply. "But I need to know what's going on." He stepped into the ship and hit the lock pad, waiting until the cargo door was secured before moving into the cockpit.

"Which room is mine?" Briana yelled from down the corridor.

"Whichever one you like best," he yelled back, secretly hoping she picked his.

"It is my job to care for her," James said. "Your job is simply to transport her to where she wishes to go."

Snorting, Alex dropped into the captain's chair. He ran a scan to check for any foreign devices and then started his preflight routine. "You sound mighty possessive for a droid."

"She had me programmed that way."

"What the hell did she do that for?"

But when Alex turned his head, the unit was gone.

* * * * *

Lust and decadence.

Those were the two descriptors that came to mind as Briana stared into the captain's quarters and drooled. Decorated in rich jewel tones and voluptuous hanging materials, the room looked nothing like the rest of the ship. She felt as if she were standing on the threshold of an ancient harem—a purely masculine retreat with all the comforts a woman could desire. Add Alexei Night to the picture and a woman would have everything she needed to be sated.

Releasing a deep breath, Bree leaned against the doorjamb and pictured the infamous pirate reclining on the bed, spread out for her pleasure. Alex's dark, dangerous presence would be showcased beautifully in such a bedroom. She closed her eyes and breathed in his scent, remembering the feel of him between her thighs, his powerful body flexing and bunching beneath her as they flew through the night. Never in her life had she experienced anything so thrilling, the world racing past her in blur, leaving only Alex as the one solid thing she could hold on to. Even now, the memory of him in her arms made her wet, made her breasts swell and grow heavy, the tips aching.

When she'd set out on this course of action, she'd told herself he was the obvious choice because he was considered the best and she tried to believe that was the only reason she'd hired him. But that wasn't entirely true. From the moment James had opened the data file she'd been captivated by the rakishly handsome captain.

The seductive promise in his gaze and wicked grin had riveted her, causing her pulse to leap to attention just from the sight of his pilot's photo. She should have known the reality would be so much better—after all, who looked good in their license picture? Alexei Night, that's who. And the damned thing was, it had been a bad photo.

Briana had wanted him on sight and when his expertise had been proven, it had given her the excuse to have him. She'd dressed especially for their first meeting, choosing her attire and hairstyle to be more appealing. Her mission was vital and her primary focus would remain on its successful completion, but in the downtime she wanted to be seduced. Truly, completely awash-in-lust seduced by a master lover. She

wanted, just once, to experience the sort of mind melting pleasure she'd read about in erotic romance e-books and Alex Night was more than enough vamp to give her what she wanted. The question was, would she be able to give him what *he* wanted?

She was damn well prepared to try. As many times as necessary.

He'd had centuries of experience while she, a mere human, had only a dozen or so liaisons in her lamentable sexual past. None of them had been extraordinary. Thankfully, the vampire was interested, but she wanted him more than interested. She wanted him panting and hungry for her. Desperate to fuck her. She wanted to unleash his animal side and leave a memory behind that he wouldn't soon forget.

That would take more than a quick capitulation. Alex would have to earn the right to take her. He was going to have to work for it. Then he would appreciate it, which in turn would make her more appreciative.

The powerful engines rumbled to life and snapped Bree out of her reverie. She turned to find another room and ran headfirst into soft pseudo-skin covering solid titanium alloy.

"Damn it, James!" she complained. "You scared me half to death. How can you walk so silently when you weigh so much?"

He smiled with endless charm. The only way one could tell he wasn't human was by the lack of matching warmth in his blue eyes. "Your thoughts are naughty, Mistress."

Bree wrinkled her nose and muttered, "You don't know the half of it."

"Not true. I detect your rapid pulse and quickened breathing. Those physical reactions are not due simply to the recent danger." He shook his head. "When will you learn that you cannot hide things from me?"

"It's an archaic expression, James darling," she explained with a sigh.

"Your father will be fine."

Her throat tightened. It still disconcerted her to realize how deeply James could read into her thoughts.

"It's all my fault he's in danger," she said bitterly. "I knew my position on vampirism would make me plenty of enemies."

"But you never knew it would come to this."

Bree arched a brow. "But you did. Anyone using logical reasoning would have known that if they couldn't get to me personally, they'd go after my family. Being shot at, being hunted… Hell, I'm used to that. I even expect it. I accepted the inevitability of my early demise long ago. But my family…?" She shuddered.

"Your family is the reason you are doing this, Mistress. They knew the risks and they support you completely."

"Because I swore they'd be safe. I told them I would protect them."

Three years ago, when her younger sister Stella married a vamp, Bree had known something had to be done to further the rights of vampires. They were banned from certain sectors, denied jobs and provided the bare minimum of health care. Sure they had healing skills that were far beyond human capability, but the virus that infected them also prevented them from bearing children and some humans wanted to keep it that way, afraid vampires would take over and the human race would become extinct.

James circled her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "You did the only thing you could think of to help your sister have the children she wanted. As the Delta Quadrant Representative your power is almost limitless."

Like any politician worth their carbon, she'd lied, cheated and deceived her way into the position. Basically, she'd played the dumb blonde role to perfection. She'd allowed the powerful lobbyists who could have kept her from winning to think she'd be easy to control and too stupid to make her own decisions. Then, once she'd won the election by a landslide, she did whatever she wanted. She did what was right.

So many of her peers started their careers with such high hopes, but eventually the need for reelection campaign funds drove them to sell their votes to the highest bidder.

Briana was lucky that vampires, her largest contributors, had a tendency to be very wealthy. Based on firsthand historical knowledge, vamps were highly cognizant of monetary forecasts. They could almost predict changes in the market and adjusted their finances accordingly.

Kneading her tense shoulders, James murmured, “With the massive financial support behind you, Mistress, you are not susceptible to bribes. You are untouchable, unbeatable and determined as hell to get your way.”

“I’m determined all right, determined not to let my family suffer because of vamp haters. They want to hit me where it hurts? I’ll hit them right back. Twice as hard.”

“And you will succeed. I have no doubt.”

She sighed. “I wish I could be as sure.”

“You are tense,” he purred in her ear, “which makes it hard to think clearly. Would you like me to relieve you?”

Closing her eyes, she let her head fall forward to better enjoy the magic of his massaging fingers. “Ummm… That sounds divine.” She knew how good his hands felt all over her body.

Alex may not like the idea of turning a sex droid into a personal assistant, but there was no way a PA droid could offer such comforts. It just wasn’t in their rigid programming to learn ephemeral pleasures. Sex droids, however, were built to please and if that meant handling communications and data in addition to their other duties they did so with only a minor adjustment to their processors.

Bree stepped away from James and moved down the corridor to find another room.

“How about these quarters, Mistress?” he asked behind her. “They look comfortable and spacious.”

She paused, thinking she didn’t much care where she slept. If she had her way, she’d be sharing the captain’s quarters before too long and Alex Night could make her

forget, if only for an hour or two, that the choices she'd made to help her family had now put them in danger.

As the ship lifted from the private landing bay and began its two-week journey to her homeworld of Tolan, Briana undressed and began to plan her lines of attack—one against the yummy Alex and the other against the forces that wanted his kind eliminated.

Chapter Two

Alex glanced around the dining area one last time, making sure that everything was as perfect as possible. He'd dimmed the cabin lights, turned on soft music and prepared Briana's favorite meal. The last had been the hardest. Since he couldn't sample the food, he had no idea if he'd cooked it right or not. It smelled…edible. However, if it was really bad, he'd purchased enough space rations to keep her alive.

He shrugged. He could always seduce her into forgetting about his questionable cooking skills. Hell, he planned to seduce her anyway. A long, slow seduction. Keeping Briana on edge was the best way to stay in control, which was a necessity. Regardless of the lust he felt for her, he had a job to do.

Her work in the Council was of unparalleled importance to the entire vamp race and he was charged with the task of keeping her safe until the threat against her family could be resolved. It was an assignment he took seriously. The mistakes of his past hadn't faded and they never would, but he could lift himself above them if he worked hard enough. He'd been given a second chance and no matter what, he would prove himself worthy of it.

Still, he didn't see the harm in enjoying her. If *he* called the shots.

With a multitude of tantalizing thoughts in mind, Alex moved down the corridor to Briana's quarters, his senses coming to a heightened awareness as he drew closer. It had been a long time since he'd felt this kind of attraction. He'd forgotten what a rush it was. It flooded his mind with decadent pleasure, like warm hands coursing across his skin, kneading his flesh, making his spine arch…

Oooohhhh… Harder, James…deeper…

Alex stumbled to a halt.

What the hell?

The sensations he was experiencing were not lustful imaginings but feelings radiating from Briana.

He swore as his fangs descended. There wasn't another woman in the universe like Briana Michaels. Physically she was no more or less than any other female he could have, but who she was inside was completely and beautifully unique. She laid her life on the line for a cause that wouldn't benefit her at all simply because it was the right thing to do. Correcting an injustice and fighting prejudice were all she cared about and because of that, Alex cared about her. It was a potent combination, her unwavering convictions, the power she wielded so easily and her passionate nature. Quite simply, Briana was one of a kind.

These next few weeks were all the time he would ever be allowed to have with her. His work and hers were literally worlds apart. After this mission he'd never see her again, so having his fill had to happen now. No way was he getting usurped by a droid. Not after all these months of waiting and planning and dreaming.

Within seconds Alex was standing inside the door to her quarters watching with possessive eyes as the blond droid straddled his naked woman.

A snarl was the only warning he gave before leaping into action.

* * * * *

Bree drifted into a state of half-awareness, imagining hypnotically dark eyes and erect fangs attached to the hands that were presently moving all over her back. The chip in her mind signaled her preferences to James, whose motions went along with her thoughts, facilitating the massage until she was completely relaxed.

Then suddenly he tensed, his body becoming a crushing pressure against her thighs. She felt him pitch forward and she screamed, knowing the droid's heavy weight could kill her.

But before that could happen, the burden was snatched away with a snarl. She rolled over, confused, and barely caught sight of James' bent legs moving horizontally out the door.

"Hey!" she yelled, leaping from the bed and dragging the sheet with her. She covered herself as she ran out to the corridor. Alexei was already halfway down the hall, her droid tucked securely beneath his arm. Bree gaped. James weighed a ton, but the vamp carried him as if he weighed nothing.

Her bare feet slapped against the cool metal floor as she gave chase. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"This thing's got to go," he muttered.

She studied the odd stillness of her droid. "What did you do to him?"

"Shut it off."

"You can't do that!" she protested.

"I just did."

Alex rounded the corridor and entered the cargo hold. Finding a neglected corner, she heard him drop James unceremoniously to the ground.

"You're going to break him," she complained, stumbling blindly into the darkness behind him.

He rounded on her, dark eyes flashing red in the unlit interior. "If only I could be so lucky."

Bree scowled. "What's your deal anyway?"

The laser brightness of his gaze grew more intense, signaling that he was moving closer. She stood her ground and lifted her chin even as her heart raced with excitement.

"I'm not sharing you with a droid. Got it?"

She blinked in surprise and then bit back a smile, grateful he couldn't see it.

"I love your smile," he purred, moving closer. "Even when it comes at my expense."

Choking, she took rapid backward steps. *Damn!* She'd forgotten he could see in the dark.

"No need to make me jealous," he said softly, the foreign inflection in his words making her nipples hard. "I'm easy."

At the reminder, she snorted and spun on her heel.

"Hey!" Now he was chasing her.

"Go away, Alex."

She shrieked as her feet left the deck and she was swung up into his arms.

"Don't be mad at me, sweetness," he said, nuzzling her throat. "I can service you much better than a droid could."

"No doubt," she said petulantly. "With your experience."

He moved down the corridor, walking straight past her room. "Isn't my experience something you want?"

Bree glared at him. "Stay out of my head, captain."

"Call me Alexei, like you do in your thoughts."

"Listen…" she began, but then fell silent as they entered the dining area. Turning her head, she gazed around the room and her mood switched from irritation to blossoming pleasure. The mess hall, normally a stark utilitarian space with metal bulkheads, chairs and tables, was transformed. "Wow," she breathed.

A small table set for one was draped in a multitude of colorful scarves and softly lit by dimmed overhead lights. She inhaled the luscious scent of curried Tolan fowl and her mouth watered.

"Do you like it?"

Looking up at him, she was arrested by his boyish, hopeful smile. Black, silky hair fell across his forehead framing his exotically handsome face with its sensual lips and

thickly lashed eyes. She was suddenly aware of the way her right breast was pressed against his chest and how her hip rested against the rippling expanse of his abdomen.

"Oh yeah, I like it." She wasn't talking about the food. And he knew it.

"Good." Alex carried her to her seat and set her down.

"Shouldn't I change?"

"Unless you're offering to lose the sheet, the answer is no."

Holding back a grin at his arrogance, Bree admired the seductive grace with which the vamp took the seat next to her. Dressed in a deep red torso-hugging vest and loose flowing pants, Alexei Night was the epitome of flamboyant male sex appeal.

"Drakish," he said in answer to her unspoken question about his heritage. "On my mother's side." Lifting the lid on the warming pot, he ladled her food into the shallow bowl in front of her before relaxing.

"That explains your coloring. I've never seen such beautiful skin on a vampire before. It's very appealing."

"Would you like to see more of it?" he asked solicitously, his long fingers reaching for the single button that held the flaps of his vest together.

She gave a breathless laugh. "Behave."

"Why?" Sprawling loose-limbed in the chair, he reached for the glass in front of him and then draped the arm that held it over the backrest, canting his body toward her. The pose caused one side of his vest to gape open, affording her an unhindered view of his powerful pecs. The air around them was thick and humid with his blatant sexuality. Her mouth watered.

Swallowing hard, Bree forced her gaze away. She had a goal and she was sticking to it, even if her pussy disagreed by throbbing and growing damp. "Curried fowl is my favorite."

"I know." The deep tone of his voice swept across her skin and left goose bumps in its wake.

"Did you read that in my mind too?" she asked, reaching for the spoon.

"No, I read it in your bio in the Council database."

"Really?" She stared at him. "It has such personal stuff in there?"

"Really." He took a sip and wrinkled his nose. As he righted his goblet, she watched the way the viscous liquid clung to the side of the glass.

She had yet to meet a vamp who didn't dislike the taste of stored blood. "No groupies?"

Alex chuckled at her irreverent reference to the vamp followers that offered their blood in return for sexual pleasure. Most vamps had one or two with them at all times. Highly sexual beings by nature, vampires relished the opportunity to have fresh blood and easily accessible orgasms. "Not on this trip, no."

"You're either a masochist or awfully sure of yourself where I'm concerned."

"*'If one believes strongly in a cause, one should dedicate themselves to it fully. By leaving room for failure, you invite it to occur.'*"

Briana stared. She'd given that speech last year at the dedication of the new vampire embassy built adjacent to Council headquarters. "I've never had someone quote me to my face before."

"Does that bother you?" he asked, twirling his goblet by the stem.

She shook her head. "No. Actually, I'm really flattered." Scooping up some curry, she brought it to her lips. The richly spiced broth exploded with flavor in her mouth and she moaned her appreciation. "You've got a great cooking unit. Most can't get the curry ratio right."

"I don't have a cooking unit."

She frowned. "You don't?"

"What would I do with one?"

"Oh yeah…"

He must have cooked the meal himself then. After researching her favorite foods. Her stomach fluttered and she set her spoon down. “What do you want from me, captain? Blood? Sex? Both? And why go to all of this trouble?”

Alex studied the contents of his glass with undue attention. “Does my occupation bother you?”

Bree tucked the sheet tighter between her breasts and avoided his question as he’d avoided hers. “Does *my* occupation bother *you*? Considering what I do for a living, does it make you uncomfortable to have me on board?”

“No.” He took another drink. “I admire you, Briana. I respect you and the strength of your convictions. Even if you championed a different cause I would still feel the same.” The quiet dignity of his tone told her he was serious.

She bit her lower lip before asking, “What do you transport? Usually.”

“Illegal aliens, contraband goods, Council Reps.”

“Ha ha. Funny. What about drugs? Weapons?”

He was silent for a long time, so long she wondered if he was going to answer. Standing, Alexei drained his glass, set it down and moved to the window. “Would smuggling those items affect your decision to take me to your bed?”

“Yes.”

“Because of your career?”

“I doubt *what* you smuggle would be of any importance to my political enemies, only the fact that I’m consorting with a known criminal would matter.” She released her breath in a rush. “Illegal drugs and weapons serve one purpose—to hurt people for profit. I couldn’t sleep with a man knowing he took part in that, regardless of how much I was tempted to.”

Alex locked his hands behind his back, bringing the muscular beauty of his biceps and shoulders into stark relief.

Heavens, he was gorgeous. A living work of art.

Her fingers toyed with her spoon before she began to eat again. She was so nervous she couldn't even enjoy the food, but going through the motions gave her something to do.

"I could lie to you, Briana, just to fuck you." His blunt statement was punctuated by a rapid succession of images in her mind—images of his mouth on her, his hands on her, his tongue licking her nipples and lapping up the cream between her legs. She saw him as he was dressed now and herself as she was dressed now. He clutched her to him and pinned her to the bulkhead. She could feel him, all of him, his cock driving into her aching pussy with such force her feet left the floor.

Sweat broke out on her skin as her spoon clattered into the bowl. "Oh God…" she moaned, her entire body shaking with lust as the pictures came in a torrent so forceful she could scarcely register them all.

"Or I could make you want me so badly that what I do for a living wouldn't matter to you." His low voice was accompanied by the feel of talented fingers plucking at her nipples, then moving between her legs.

It was all in her mind, she knew. The scent of his skin…the warmth of his breath…the expertness of his touch…

Briana pushed back from the table so fast she knocked the chair over. Alexei turned to face her in a graceful movement, completely in control.

"Stop it," she said, in a shaky voice.

With an arch of his brow, the images and sensations disappeared.

Leaning against the table with one hand, she took shuddering breaths, willing her pulse to slow.

"I wanted you to know, Bree, that I have no reason to lie. You'd spread your legs eagerly if I wanted you to. You might hate us both in the morning, but if all I wanted was to fuck or feed, that wouldn't matter. Vamps have their Calling for a reason—to survive. Subduing prey is nothing to us."

He moved toward her with predatory grace, the wide legs of his pants swirling around his bare feet. “But your feelings do matter to me, so I’ll tell you the truth. I don’t smuggle drugs or weapons any longer, but I did at one time.”

“Damn you.” She shivered with desire. “You could have just said what you meant and not tortured me first.”

He reached the table and began clearing it, moving the dishes to the sideboard. “But then you couldn’t be certain.”

“How can I be certain now?” Frustrated by his calm in the face of her falling apart, she cast off any illusions of hiding her thoughts. “I want you. I wanted you before, but now it’s unbearable. I’d fuck you on a crate of blasters at this moment and you know it.” Briana straightened and moved away with rapid strides, determined to get to her room and take care of herself.

But Alex moved too quickly. Before she knew what hit her, she was flat on her back on the table. “Damn it!” she snapped, hitting his rock-hard chest ineffectually with her hands. “I wanted you to wait for it. Beg for it!”

As if he would. He could get it from anyone.

“I only want it from you,” he murmured, catching her flailing fists and kissing the knuckles.

“Why?” She stared up in him, startled by the sweet gesture.

“Does there have to be a reason?” Nimble fingers dipped into the valley between her breasts and lifted the two halves of the sheet away. His breath sucked in sharply at the sight of her nakedness. For a moment she was cold and then the heat of his gaze chased the chill away. She watched in stunned, aroused amazement as his fangs descended and then very slowly ascended again.

“What the…?”

Shaking his head, Alex spread his fingers and ran them over the swell of her breasts until he reached the tips. “Not tonight.” He met her gaze. “Not ever, if you don’t want.”

He licked his lips and then bent his head, his tongue swirling around one hard, aching nipple with breathtaking skill before moving to the other.

Bree arched upward helplessly. She wanted him to wrap his mouth around her and suck. She wanted his fingers on her skin and inside her body. She wanted him to fulfill those images he'd shown her earlier. Damn it, she *wanted*. Badly.

"Uh-uh," he said softly. "Not tonight. You're too worked up, too hot for it. You're not thinking clearly and you'll need to be in order to make up your mind. I don't want any regrets between us."

She pressed her breasts into his hands. "You want me to beg."

"No, sweetness. I've got no problem doing the begging. In fact, I'm looking forward to it." Alexei leaned over, resting his cheek on her bare stomach, his talented hands kneading her flesh. His tongue snaked out and dipped in her navel. "When you're ready and not a minute sooner."

"I'm ready." And she was. She believed him completely and she trusted him. How could she not? He'd stood between her and a blaster shot after she'd already paid him. He'd had nothing to gain. His concern today had been genuine.

"No, you're horny," he argued with a low chuckle. "That's not the same thing."

She shifted her fingers through his dark silky hair and sensed the lust he held tightly restrained. There were depths to this man she hadn't considered, because she hadn't known about them. She'd been captivated by his physical beauty, but there was so much more to learn, like the glimpse of tarnished honor that surprised and pleased her. He could fuck her now, but he held himself in check. For her.

Alex straightened and removed his vest, arresting her attention with the rippling muscles of his torso. As he lowered himself over her, Briana spread her legs to make room for his body, absolutely and completely unconcerned that she was laid out for him like a feast. The hard, clenched planes of his stomach made contact with the damp flesh between her thighs and she groaned, the fever in her blood rising until her skin was covered with sweat.

Alex's hips undulated, sliding his ridged abdomen along the folds of her pussy and she gasped as another wave of heat swept through her.

"Could I make you come like this?" he wondered aloud. Resting his elbows on the table, he reached for her nipples and shimmied again. "Just our bodies touching, nothing more?"

"I don't know," she said breathlessly. "Could you?"

When he arched a brow, she explained. "Unlike you, I'm not easy. It takes a lot of work to make me orgasm. Most men get frustrated and give up."

The smile that curved his lips took her breath away. "I won't give up." He rolled her nipples between his fingertips, his grin widening as her eyes half closed on a pleasured moan. "I have forever, sweetness, but it won't take nearly that long."

"It's not my fault." Bree sighed. "I love sex and I love to orgasm. I just can't seem to do both at the same time."

He chuckled. "That's the problem with you humans. You're always in a hurry. Some things take time and an attention to detail."

Time. She always wished she had more of it. Especially now. Alexei Night was a luxury to be savored.

Her hands moved from his nape to stroke his spine, loving the way he arched into her touch. She'd heard vamps were very responsive and sensual creatures. She'd like to test that theory by tying Alex to his decadent bed and having her way with him for hours.

"I'd like that too," he whispered.

"No fair." Her lower lip stuck out in a pout. "I don't have the ability to know what you're thinking."

He licked her lip and then began to move, stroking his torso along her clit, inciting a riot of sensations that tightened her womb and made her breasts swell in his hands. His taste—dark, exotic and richly intoxicating—flavored her mouth. Bree wanted him to

kiss her and let her taste him more deeply, but he wouldn't give her what she wanted. And he was doing it on purpose, she knew.

"I'm thinking patience isn't one of your virtues," he teased. "I'm thinking you like hard, quick fucks, but you don't get enough foreplay beforehand to orgasm from them. I think your skin feels like satin and smells delicious."

Bree groaned. She was dying here and he was far too collected for her tastes. Hoping to goad him out of his rigid control, she moved sinuously beneath him, her nails raking his back, her legs wrapping around his lean waist. She lifted her head and bit his earlobe. "You feel so good," she breathed.

The tightening of his muscles was the only indication that she'd moved him at all.

She rubbed her aching nipples against his chest, torturing herself in her attempt to torment him. "I've dreamed of you, Alexei."

"Lay back, Bree," he said, his voice maddeningly calm with a hint of indulgent amusement. "Just enjoy it."

She fell back onto the table. "You suck."

He laughed. "I will later, if that's what you'd like."

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the feel of his body stroking her pussy and the tight clench of his fingertips on her nipples. Drenched in sweat and aching all over, she arched her neck and whimpered in pleasure.

Yes. Alex's low purring voice floated through her mind. *Don't think about me, sweetness. My pleasure will be found in yours.*

"I wanted to please you."

You do.

"I-I want to be special."

You are. His tongue licked the column of her throat, tracing the line of a rapidly pulsing vein.

Locking her ankles together, Briana rocked in counter-rhythm to his movements, allowing the stark eroticism of the moment to sweep through her. Alexei was in her arms, just as she'd longed for him to be, and the pleasure of his embrace went far beyond what she'd imagined.

His hot, wet mouth closed around her breast and sucked leisurely, a slow insistent tugging she felt all the way to her core. The need to come became a driving force and she writhed beneath him, scratching his back, struggling for it, hating the desperation she felt at the thought that she might not make it there. Again.

I'll take you there, he soothed, his mouth working her nipple expertly. *Just relax.*

"Now, Alexei!"

Patience.

Frustrated tears squeezed past her lashes and fell into her hair. Her skin was too tight, too hot. Her cunt spasmed desperately. Aching…needing…wanting… She bucked beneath him. "Fuck me!"

Alex's arms shot underneath her hips and lifted her higher. He altered position, aligning his rigid cock to her slit and thrust through the lips—once, twice, thrice—the material of his pants creating a luscious friction on her clit.

That was all she needed to come.

"Oh God!" Briana bowed upward with her orgasm, her cunt grasping greedily for his cock and finding nothing to hold. Sensing her need, he slid one hand underneath her thigh and thrust two fingers into her drenched pussy. He continued to rock his cock against her clit, taking her from one tantalizing release to another. And then another. Starved for him, she took everything he offered and demanded more.

He rode her until she begged him to cease, her skin so sensitive she couldn't bear to be touched. Lowering her to the table with infinite care, he brushed the curls from her face before kissing her softly. His fingers left her cunt and she whimpered at the loss. Then she shivered as he put them in his mouth and sucked them clean, his tongue swirling around each one with a soft, pained groan.

The solicitousness of his movements angered her. She was naked, sweating, *vulnerable*, while the devastating vamp looked no different than he had at dinner—cool, calm and completely in control of his desire. Before he could step away, Bree cupped his cock with her hands, not at all surprised to find his pants soaked with her cream.

No! He caught her wrists.

"Yes," she insisted, fighting his grip. She lifted her gaze to his, her determination obvious.

She held on. He held on. Between them raged a silent battle for control.

"I just had a brutal lesson in patience, Alexei. I may not have forever to show you what I learned, but I do have two weeks."

As he breathed deep, his nostrils flared. His eyes narrowed and burned with something not quite human, but she wasn't afraid. She knew without a doubt he would never hurt her. It was strange to be so certain about an almost complete stranger, but she was.

Smiling, she teased, "Don't be so stubborn."

His hands tightened a moment and she thought he would refuse, and then they fell away.

Hurrying before he changed his mind, Bree tugged at his waistband. The comfortable material stretched and lowered, catching on the tip of his upthrust shaft which tented the front. Pulling harder on the elastic, she freed him and gasped.

"Wow." She blinked, awed at the sight of him. Alexei Night was thick, *very* thick and long. She licked her lips and he groaned. "No wonder you're so cocky." She giggled. "No pun intended."

Fascinated by the size and perfectly formed beauty of his cock, she stroked it, admired it and coveted it. He clasped his hands behind him, granting her permission to do whatever she wished. Pleased, she looked up at him. And stilled.

Alex stood unmoving, his jaw clenched so tight the muscle ticced in protest. As she watched him, he shuddered, the momentary break in his reserve betraying a wealth of desire ruthlessly leashed. He wasn't in as much control as he tried to appear. In fact, her best guess would be that he was teetering on the verge of losing it.

And she wanted to push him over.

Tracing the thick veins that lined the proud shaft, Bree marveled at the silken texture and unbelievable hardness. She reached lower and cupped the heavy sac below, testing its weight. "You have no hair here," she noted, her palms tingling wherever she touched him.

Do you like that? Even in her thoughts, his voice was strained.

"Oh yes. What's not to like?"

He shuddered again and his balls drew up tight in her hands. Gripping his cock with two fists, she began to pump. He hissed and threw his hips forward.

Harder.

She gentled her touch.

Faster.

She slowed down.

Damn it, Bree!

She grinned. "Not so much fun when you're the one waiting, eh?"

Then a picture of Alex formed in her mind. She saw his powerful frame tensing in orgasm and felt the hot release of his cum splashing across her breasts. The sounds of his pleasure echoed in her mind and her heart welled with tenderness.

"Would you like that?" she asked breathlessly, her blood heating with renewed desire.

Very much.

"Would you beg me for it?"

His wicked mouth curved, revealing sparkling fangs. "Please."

Briana's heart leapt. It was simply unfair for one man to be so achingly perfect. "How could any woman refuse a plea like that?"

Tightening her fists, she began to work his cock with hard tugs, using the sounds of his guttural cries to guide her speed and rhythm.

"Does that feel good, baby?" she asked hoarsely when his last grunt was loud and tormented.

You know it does. Too good.

He felt so hot in her hands, so solid and thick. She shivered. "Damn. I can't wait to fuck this cock."

Bree… He swelled in response to her words, his voice gritty with need. Knowing he was close, she urged him on.

"Do you know how tight I'll grip you, Alex? It's been a long time since I was with someone, and he wasn't anywhere near your size. You'll have to stretch me, make my cunt fit you, but I'm so wet. Dripping. That will help. Can you imagine how it'll feel?"

"Ah, fuck!" He gripped her shoulders and began to fuck through her fists while she pumped his shaft in counter-tempo. His pace was frenetic, his lust palpable. He growled just before his cock jerked violently. Briana watched in an agony of lust as he came, his cum shooting across her breasts in hot, steady bursts. His thighs quaked, his fingers dug into her skin with bruising force and he chanted her name in her mind—*Bree, Bree, Bree*—so she knew, even though his eyes were shut tight, that he was with her in his pleasure.

Awash in his delight with her nipples peaked tight and his cum dripping from them to splash on her lap, her breathing was as labored as his. He finished finally, his heavy balls hanging empty beneath his semi-hard cock. He was glorious, naked from the waist up, his body lean and tight and glistening with sweat.

"Bree," he gasped, his eyes opening and then glowing possessively as he stared at his primitive claim all over her chest. His large hands reached out, cupping her breasts, kneading his cum into her skin.

"That was awesome," she said, with a wondering laugh. "Wow."

"You're telling me?" He arched a brow as he pulled up his pants, scooped her into his arms and carried her down the hall to his room. "I can barely walk and I'm a vamp. That should tell you what kind of shape I'm in."

"Where are we going?" His bed, she hoped.

"The shower."

"Oh." She couldn't hide the disappointment in her voice.

Alexei laughed, a deep husky sound that fueled her growing affection for him. "Did I not give you enough orgasms, sweetheart?" He kissed her forehead. "I'll have to work on that."

Flushing in embarrassment, she buried her face in his shoulder. "I can't help it," she mumbled against his damp skin. "That was the hottest thing I've ever seen."

I'm glad you aren't offended.

"Huh?" Bree lifted her head and met his smiling gaze. "Who would be offended by having a gorgeous guy so hot for her that he gets off without sex?"

I think, he drawled, *that some women would have found that very un-PC.*

"Sucks to be them," she dismissed with a shrug. "Count me in the camp of women who find blatant displays of testosterone sexually exciting."

As he stepped into his decadent quarters and then into bathroom, he hugged her tight. "You're different than I thought you'd be."

"Oh yeah?" She swayed a little as he set her down and he steadied her before dropping his pants. Moving into the shower, Alex turned on the water and she tried not to drool. "Is that good or bad?"

"It's great."

Turning around, Bree took in her surroundings. She'd traveled in a great many transports and one thing they all had in common was "the head". Usually the room was a metal box with a sink, a toilet and a rectangular metal-lined shower. Alexei's private

bathroom was as far removed from those spaces as it was possible to get. Taupe-colored stone with golden veins covered the floors and walls, and when she finished her circle, she noted the shower was lined too. It also had no door.

Alex, completely naked and dripping with water, held out his hand in invitation. Achingly aroused all over again, she gladly accepted.

"You're just so serious on the vid unit," he said. "So formal and—"

"Uptight?" Sighing at the feel of warm water coursing down her back, Briana closed her eyes and tilted her head back under the spray. Then she moaned as Alex caressed her breasts with soapy hands. "I have to be on my toes all the time. My opponents are always looking for any weakness to exploit."

"It's got to be hard for you." He tugged at her nipples with his fingertips and the sensation coursed down her body, making her cunt clench in response.

"I hope so," she breathed, opening her eyes to stare up at him as she took his cock in hand. He swelled instantly at her touch. "Great recovery time."

His mouth curved and he reached between her legs, his soap-slick fingers parting her and then rubbing her swollen clit. "I've waiting a long time for this. It's inspiring to finally have you here and naked."

Widening her stance shamelessly, she clutched the top of his shoulders for support as her knees went weak. "W-what?" She shivered at a particularly skillful stroke. "We just met."

Alex reached around her, cupping a butt cheek to support her as he rinsed off the soap. Then he thrust two fingers into her, studying her response intently. "Ready for those orgasms you wanted?"

"Oh hell…" She sagged into his embrace as he began to fuck her with his fingers, stroking as deep as he could.

"You're right about being tight," he growled into her ear before biting the lobe. "And you feel like silk inside. Drenched silk." His tone was harsh, almost brutal, and she remembered suddenly that he wasn't human, not anymore.

As his thumb found her clit and rubbed in time with his pumping fingers, she tried to hold off the orgasm, wanting this moment to last. The feel of his skin, slick with water, and the fog around them, created a scene better than any she'd ever read about. "What do you mean you waited for this?" she gasped.

"I've watched you on the vid for a long time."

Lifting her head from his shoulder, she gazed up at him. His eyes were dark, the irises thin rings around enlarged pupils. "And you wanted to fuck me?" Bree couldn't believe it.

"Oh yeah." His wicked smile revealed his fangs. "Hard. Bent over your desk, your tight ass in the air, your cunt creamy…" Alexei twisted his fingers inside her as her mind flooded with images of his fantasies. "And hot around my cock. Your voice hoarse from screaming my name."

She whimpered and moved her hips in rhythm with his thrusting.

"Jack me off again," he ordered, his voice so guttural she could barely understand him.

The crude command coming from any other man would have ended the encounter immediately. But coming from Alex, it was so arousing she almost had an orgasm. She not only had the right to touch him, but he *wanted* her to. Desperately. None of her fantasies could come close to this.

The dreams she'd had were of hot, sweaty, messy sex. She hadn't imagined the darkly seductively scent of him or the rough satin feel of his golden skin. She certainly hadn't imagined his touch, so gentle and reverent, like she was valuable to him for more than her money.

Her touch, when she reached for him, was just as affectionate as his. She grasped the heated length of his cock and stroked him lovingly. Longingly.

"You're so beautiful," she breathed, watching the way his abdomen muscles laced tight with tension.

"I'm glad you think so."

Lifting her chin, she met his gaze again. She let him see the entirety of what she was feeling—the wonder of discovery, the pleasure in his touch, the lust inspired by the feel of his thick cock pulsing in her hands.

Alex shuddered. "When you look at me like that…" His cock jerked.

"What? What happens?"

He shook his head, but she knew. There was too much…*emotion*…between them. Her throat ached, her eyes burned. Bree was grateful for the shower mist that hid her sudden tears. She wanted to keep him, damn it. Not just to have a gorgeous man in her bed, but because he'd cooked for her. Because he'd been protective in the bar and jealous over James. Because he cared enough about her to want her memories of him to be good ones.

And that was all she could have of him. Memories. Would he remember her a century from now? Two? Several?

They were strangers. Why did she care?

Spread your legs.

As he finger-fucked her with greater urgency, Bree hooked one leg over his lean hip and rode his hand. "Oh God…" She was so close to coming, but she didn't want to go alone. They were in this together, whatever *this* was.

Yes.

That dark whisper was raspy, and grew even hoarser as she pleasured him ruthlessly, both of her hands pumping his cock in just the way she'd learned earlier.

"Fuck yeah…" he groaned, stroking her cunt in the same rhythm she used on him. Their hips rocked softly, their bodies straining. She offered him her mouth, desperate

for a kiss. Instead he pressed his cheek to hers so that his labored breaths gusted across her ear.

"I want you," she gasped, wanting his kiss and his cock and a bed to roll around in. She wanted comfort and an end to this feeling of being rushed. She wanted to silence the driving voice in her mind that said this bliss was only temporary, but it increased in volume, crashing against her in hot waves of need.

It took her a moment to realize it was Alexei she was hearing.

From then on soft and sweet wasn't possible. Their mutual drive to come was raw and hungry, both of them running away into the forgetful arms of climax. But as they reached orgasm together, their bodies shuddering against each other, her cunt drenching his hand, his cock spewing its seed, the tenderness with which they held each other was undeniable.

It wasn't making love.

But it was awfully close.

Chapter Three

What the fuck just happened?

Alex ran a hand through his wet hair and felt like he'd just been run over by a transport. He'd really like to sit down for a moment and consider the mess he was in, but the insistent beeping from the comm link wouldn't allow him to do so.

Falling wearily into his chair on the bridge, he activated the comm and watched as the President of the Interstellar Security Council came into view.

"What the hell took you so long, Night?" Derek Atkinson barked. "You were supposed to check in hours ago. Did you make contact with Representative Michaels?"

"Yeah, she's on board. We're on our way."

Derek's steely gaze narrowed. "Your hair is wet." His lips twisted with wry amusement. "Damn, you move fast. I thought she'd resist you for a day or two at least."

Scowling, Alex said, "I took a shower."

"Sure. Whatever you say. What you do with Michaels on your own time is your own business. Just don't let it interfere with the mission."

"You're not worried I'll lose my edge?" Alex asked with raised brows.

The president laughed. "You, Night? Hell no. And certainly not with a human."

Leaning back in his chair, Alex wished he could say the same with as much conviction. Unfortunately for everyone involved, his objectivity was shot to hell. What was supposed to have been two weeks of pleasure with a woman he admired had turned into something he didn't quite understand.

"Besides," Derek continued. "Intimacy with her will make it more likely she'll trust you. We need to know what she's expected to give in return for the safety of her family."

Alex's jaw tensed. He'd been distracted by lust earlier, but Briana's love for her family had shone through. She was terrified for them. "Are they safe?"

"To the best of my knowledge, yes. Her father hasn't been seen at his residence lately, but I'm still not certain if that's a bad thing or not. He may have just gone away, I'm looking into it. Representative Michaels sent her sister and brother-in-law on a trip. She may have done the same for her father. Apparently she hasn't disclosed anything to them, so they don't know they're in danger. If things heat up though, I'll have to place them all in protective custody."

"That's where they should be now."

Derek arched a brow. "If we move them, we'll risk discovery, you know that. If I simply wanted to keep them safe, I wouldn't have you sent you in undercover."

"Then Briana's safety isn't your primary objective?" he asked grimly.

"*Briana*, is it? Yes, Rep. Michaels' safety is of paramount importance."

"But her family's isn't."

"No," Derek agreed. "Her family's isn't."

Alex didn't know why he was surprised. He knew the ins and outs of his job. That didn't mean he had to like them. In this case, he definitely didn't, but he owed Derek Atkinson his life, so he kept his thoughts to himself. He'd puzzle out a way to keep Bree's family safe when he had some time to think.

"Find out what she knows, Night. And check in with me daily. Things may be happening here that you don't know about."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm relieved she's safe with you."

"She almost wasn't." Alex drummed his fingers on the console. "Someone attempted to assassinate her at the meeting point. A blaster shot missed her by a hair." His stomach clenched at the memory. He'd nearly lost her.

The momentary silence that greeted his disclosure was deafening. “That location was a carefully guarded secret,” Derek said tightly.

“She brought in Chiles and Sandoval as bargaining chips to negotiate my fee. I’m sure they bragged. Just being asked by her was a huge coup.”

“Damn. She’s got balls.”

“Yeah and a new PA droid, which explains why we weren’t aware of the appointments with the other two smugglers.”

“I’ll look into it. We’ll need to tap into the new droid and see what events we might have missed since she replaced the old one. I’ll send you the schematics once I have them.” Derek glanced away from the screen. “It must have been a very recent purchase. I have no mention of it here, which worries me. If my sources are faulty, there might be a lot more we don’t know, which leaves us vulnerable. Any idea who the assassin was? Did you see them?”

Alex shook his head. “Not a clue. But I’ve got a feeling it was either a droid or a Shinite-trained professional.”

Derek whistled.

The Shinites were an ancient race known for their deadly fighting abilities. They became so focused on their missions they mentally disconnected, making it impossible for a vamp to detect them.

“You didn’t sense anything at all?”

“Nothing.”

“Damn. Shinites cost a fortune, so do droid assassins. If you’re right, this isn’t one person we’re talking about, but a group. I’ll assign more agents to back you up in Tolan. In the meantime, watch your back, Night. And keep me posted.”

“Yes, sir. Will do. Night out.”

The screen went black as Alex signed off. For a moment, he looked over his semicircular console at the view of space outside the bridge window.

What the hell was he going to do? He had no fucking clue.

Standing with a weary sigh, he moved back down the hall and entered Bree's room. He stood over her sleeping form, taking in her damp curls and barely parted lips. Deep inside him a wealth of compassion swelled, threatening to overflow. She looked so soft and innocent in slumber, nothing like the vixen who'd very nearly brought him to his knees in the shower, although he liked that side of her too. A lot.

He'd been forced to put her to sleep, something all vamps had the mental ability to do, when she'd tried to coax him into bed with her. He'd been so close to losing what little control he had and fucking them both out of their misery. A tantalizing prospect, but he had to earn her trust first. Once he got her into his bed, he intended her to stay there for the duration of their journey and he didn't want her feeling remorse about anything that happened between them.

Derek wanted him to earn her trust for the mission's sake. Alex wanted to earn her trust for himself. He hoped like hell she realized what it had cost him to deny them both tonight. His hunger for her was a driving force, making his jaw ache and his entire body tense. Lust, he knew well. This kind of need was completely unfamiliar, goaded as it was by respect for her strength and tenderness for her vulnerabilities.

Blood and sex. That was all he could have of her.

He prayed that would be enough to sate him.

* * * * *

Wielding her flashlight carefully, Briana made her way through the pitch-black cargo bay until she found James. She wrinkled her nose at the sight of him frozen in his kneeling position between two crates, his eyes open and sightless. The poor thing looked so sad and kind of creepy. She searched along his nape until she found the tiny reset button. James blinked and then scowled before rising.

"I do not like Captain Night, Mistress," he grumbled.

"I'm sorry, James. The captain turned out to have a bit of a possessive streak."

"He has no reason to feel any ownership of you." He paused a moment with his head cocked to the side. "All systems are working correctly and the link between us was not broken, but if something had happened to you, I would have been unable to respond."

"Nothing happened," she soothed, running a hand along his arm. "Let's get out of here. This place gives me the willies." With its three-story-tall ceiling and massive cranes, the vast space made her shiver.

James followed. "Quite a bit happened. You and the captain are now involved."

Blushing, Bree shut the cargo door behind them. "I wouldn't say that. We—"

"Became intimate," he said flatly. "I knew you had considered that scenario a possibility, but I had hoped your better sense would assert itself."

"Excuse me?"

Droids were programmed to never aggressively contradict their owners. Because of her passionate nature, she'd had James' programming altered a little to facilitate discussion, knowing that listening to a purely logical viewpoint would help her considerably. However, discussing her sex life was not one of the things she'd wanted to debate. And discussing the intimacy she'd shared with Alex seemed…*wrong*. It was too private to share.

"I apologize," he said quickly, reading her irritation. "How you handle your personal affairs is for you to decide. It is simply beyond my reasoning to understand why you would invest so much of your life and risk your very existence for a cause, then jeopardize it so easily by aligning yourself with a known criminal."

"I'm not aligning myself with him!" she argued and then her face heated again. They'd aligned all right. Perfectly. She shivered in remembrance. She'd known Alex would be an expert lover, but to make her come repeatedly without using his cock? Hell, she'd had the best orgasms of her life last night. What would it be like when he actually did fuck her?

"I am equipped with all the tools needed to please you just as well as Night can," James said, his hand coming to rest on the small of her back. But unlike when Alexei touched her, Briana felt no thrill of awareness or spark of heat. Some owners had been known to fall in love with their droid companions, but Bree had never been able to look past the fact that James' emotions were not real and with a simple code change or two, he could care for another owner just as well as he cared for her.

"I know your thoughts, Mistress, and because of that I can touch you in just the way you desire at just the moment you desire it. No one else can do that for you."

"Thank you for the offer, James, but you know how I feel about that."

"Sex with a living being who doesn't love you is better than sex with a droid whose sole purpose for existence is to serve you?"

Disgruntled by his strange mood, she asked, "What is up with you today?"

James shrugged. "You seem determined to ignore your own doubts. I am simply repeating your thoughts aloud."

"I'm not thinking that at all," she denied. She remembered clearly the sight of Alex's fangs descending when he'd seen her naked and the way he'd fought back the primal instinct by retracting them again. Bree knew enough about vamps to know that must have been painful and yet he'd done it. For her.

He'd also performed some mind trick to put her to sleep. They'd be exchanging some words about trying *that* again, but she knew it was another sacrifice he'd made for her, a way to give her the self-control she hadn't been capable of last night. Alex didn't love her, but he did respect her, which was more than a droid was capable of.

"Alexei Night is a criminal, Mistress. I hope you keep that in mind. He is very wealthy and a very talented pilot. There is no reason for him to live his existence outside the law, but that is what he chooses to do."

Bree bit her lower lip. She'd already planned to ask Alex about his choice in occupation. There were alternatives she could offer him, if he was interested. She hoped he was. The council could use his skill and he would be a valuable asset to them.

Pausing in the corridor by her room, Briana heard Alexei singing from his seat on the bridge. They'd entered the Ligerian Ice Field early that morning. Traversing through the monstrous, free-floating glaciers was beyond treacherous. A great many pilots had met their end here and yet Alex's skill was such that she'd scarcely felt a bump since they entered. The fact that he was singing told her how relaxed he was under pressure. She paused a moment on the threshold of her cabin, listening to the beautiful sound of a foreign tune sung in his baritone. He was a man of many layers and she knew she'd barely scratched the surface. She was eager to scratch some more.

"James," she murmured, her thoughts half distracted with her desire to watch Alex in his element. "Were you able to receive deep space relays while in stasis? We haven't missed any more demands, have we?"

"I have been monitoring the news, but no further demands have been made through your private channels. Your sister sent her grateful regards and said she is enjoying her vacation with her husband. The networks have been reporting illness as the reason for your absence from the House floor, just as you'd stated in your press release. That excuse should continue to work for another few days at least, perhaps even longer."

"Excellent. Keep one eye on that for me. Adjust the reports from my office as necessary to keep the impression going. Also at the end of every session, I want the minutes downloaded and ready for my review. My absence will create an opportunity for one of my opponents to present their agenda. I want to know the minute they make an attempt."

"Of course." He caught her arm as she stepped away. "Do you think it is wise to distract the captain at this moment?"

She looked over her shoulder at him with a frown, still trying to get used to having her thoughts spoken out loud. "I won't distract him, I just want to observe."

With that absolutely delicious thought in mind, she left James in her room and went to ogle a very sexy vampire.

* * * * *

Alex was grinning like an idiot. He knew it and couldn't stop it.

Briana's lust and admiration saturated the air around him, coursing over his skin like warm water and causing his breathing to quicken. Anticipation thrummed through his veins, just as it did in hers. She'd been watching him for the last hour, completely silent except for the strength of her thoughts, which were powerful. Watching him at the controls had turned her on and her desire had ignited his.

Over the last two centuries, he'd been desired for a great many things—his vampirism, his wicked reputation, his looks. Never could he recall being wanted because he was talented at something. Never had a woman grow soft and wet simply because he knew how to fly and knew how to do it very well.

"We're in the clear," he called softly, leaning back in his chair. "You can come closer, if you like."

As she approached, the tart scent of her skin grew stronger and Alex took a deep breath, absorbing her arousal into his blood.

The hunger inside him stirred in response. Flying through the Ligerian Ice Fields was always a rush, but it had never been as exciting as when Bree watched him do it.

"That was awesome," she breathed, her voice low and throaty. "I'm so damn impressed I don't know what to say." Coming around his chair, she came to a halt directly in front on him.

Alex gripped the armrests to prevent himself from snatching her close. This time, the first move had to be hers. "Thank you."

Her eyes sparkled with appreciation and then warmed as she raked him from head to toe. He almost purred with delight. Dressed in short shorts and a tight combat tee, Briana looked ready to take on the world. He'd settle for her just taking on him. And when her lips curved in a slow inviting smile, he knew she was prepared to do just that.

She leaned her hip against the console, showing off her long, lithe legs. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure. Ask me anything.” *Ask me to take you to bed, to make love to you for days, to…*

“You are the most amazingly gifted pilot I’ve ever seen. Why are you smuggling?”

He sighed. “Why don’t I have a respectable job, you mean? Why am I a criminal?” Alex ran a hand through his hair. “It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got nowhere to go.” She arched her brow and when she did that, he couldn’t deny her anything. Damn, he loved it when she looked like that. That light touch of haughty arrogance made him want to fuck her so hard she wouldn’t be able walk. It was such a sham, that cool disdain. She was all fire and passion under that façade, as he knew firsthand.

“I grew up poor,” he began. “Very poor. My father ran off when I was a kid and my mother could barely scrape a couple of credits together. We were hungry most of the time, and my brother and I couldn’t do the things other kids got to do. It was miserable and I spent a lot of time dreaming about escaping that life. All I wanted to do was be a pilot. Getting out of there, seeing the universe… I would have done anything for that.

“At the time, two hundred years ago, the cost of flight academy was so high it made it an unattainable goal for me and the military wanted advanced schooling that we couldn’t afford. When my older brother said he knew of a way I could make enough credits to support our mother and learn how to fly at the same time, I leapt at the chance.” His lips twisted ruefully. “Of course, there was a price.”

“Uh-oh.” Bree’s lips made a moue in sympathy. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“Depends on how you look at, sweetheart. My brother introduced me to the leader of a local gang called The Crew. They were very successful smugglers. The money was good and steady, and all new recruits were sent to flight academy. The Crew only wanted the very best pilots. In return for the job, the money and the schooling, I had to accept the virus and give up my mortality. I had to dedicate myself to The Crew for eternity.”

"Wow." She stared at him with wide eyes. "That's steep for hazing."

"At the time, it seemed like a dream come true—become a pilot, build up my credits and take care of my mom. Not to be crude, but the women were plentiful and the thought of living forever in the prime of my life sounded pretty good." He shrugged. "As you said last night, what's not to like?"

She blushed and Alex laughed. Briana was lovelier today than she'd been yesterday. There was glow to her and a sweet familiarity brought on by their intimacy of the night before.

"And so you're in this trade forever then?" she asked, trying to hide her disappointment and failing.

"No." He smiled at her sudden hopeful interest. "I got caught."

"How?" Her obvious surprise was very flattering.

"My brother sold me out. Evan brought me into The Crew to get out of one scrape and then sacrificed me to worm his way out of another."

Briana gaped. "How could anyone do that to a family member?"

"Not everyone has the sense of familial loyalty you do. It's one of the many things I admire about you."

Pushing away from the console, Bree came over and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. The small gesture of comfort hit him with such force, he was glad to be seated.

He swallowed hard and looked away, staring out the bridge window at the endless space beyond. "Evan tapped into my cargo droid and downloaded all of my routes. Then he asked me to switch runs with him. He said he had a girlfriend on Rashier 6 who was getting upset that he was visiting so infrequently. His route paid more than mine so I traded without question and considered myself lucky. But he was under investigation and I was taken into custody in his place. I spent three years on Hazin Prime."

Standing, Alex moved to the window and put distance between them. There was too much he couldn't say and his attachment to her was strong enough that she would sense his turmoil if he stayed too close.

He couldn't tell her how Derek Atkinson had come to the vamp penal colony and offered him a second chance to live a worthy life. He couldn't tell her that he worked on the same side of the law as she did. He couldn't tell her that his interest in her went far beyond money, blood or carnal pleasure. The most he could do was take a deep breath and pray that she would want him anyway.

"Why didn't you start over when you got out?" she asked behind him and he could feel her despondency. She didn't know that he'd begun his life anew. And he couldn't tell her.

"It's hard to find gainful employment when you have a record. No one trusts you."

"By all accounts, you have enough credits to quit."

"I couldn't quit flying. It's in my blood. It's as much a part of me as my vampirism."

"What about the tourist trade?"

"I don't qualify for a permit." Alex turned around and his heart clenched at the sight of her distress. It took everything he had to hold his tongue when all he wanted in the universe was to tell her that he *was* the type of man she wished he was. "Is it that important to you to that I fall into the status quo?"

Briana held out her hands to him. "I want you to work for me. I could use a private transport and—"

"Are you insane?" he asked with wide eyes.

"It was just a bit of smuggling, not—"

"It wasn't 'just a bit of smuggling', Bree. Those blasters you mentioned? I had those on board plus half a hold full of photon torpedoes." Of course, The Crew had led him to believe he was helping the Gorans fight ethnic cleansing, but then he hadn't done the research to verify that. In truth, he hadn't wanted to know. He'd just wanted to believe.

"Oh." She sank into his captain's chair.

Mentally kicking himself for saying the words that would push her away, Alex turned his back to her, his fists clenching with frustration.

"I don't understand," she said softly behind him. "I just can't picture you doing those things without a qualm."

"Why not?" he bit out.

"Because I just can't."

"You don't know what I'm capable of. You don't know me."

"I know you had enough honor not to have sex with me last night, even though I begged you to, just because you didn't want me to regret it." Her voice drew closer. "I know you put yourself in harm's way for me yesterday, for no good reason at all."

"Don't you think you might be rationalizing goodness in me when there isn't any, just so you feel comfortable wanting to fuck me?"

"Hmmm…" Her fingers brushed along his wrist, instantly turning his ire into heated lust. "So we're at an impasse. You can't sleep with me because you want to earn my trust and I can't sleep with you because if I do, my trust becomes questionable. Either way we're screwed, but only in the figurative sense."

Bree started to move away and the loss of her presence caused a physical ache. Alex spun quickly, clutching her slight form to his chest. "You have to want me for who I am, Briana. Record, career and all."

"I do." She stared up at him with an earnest gaze. "But that doesn't mean I can't wish for our situations to be different."

He searched her face with its determined chin and carnal mouth, features that no vid unit could do justice to. In person, she was stunningly perfect. "Why? How will that affect what happens over the next two weeks? You wanted a fantasy. Let me give it to you."

Her hands stroked the length of his spine. "Maybe I want the fantasy to be real."

Stiffening in her embrace, he began to pull away. That was his fantasy, too. Damn, how he wished he could keep her! But that would never become a reality.

"I'm sorry." She released him without protest. "I shouldn't have said that. No pressure or anything. I just—"

Alex dropped to his knees before her, unable to fight his attraction when she looked so forlorn. "I want you." He raised his gaze to lock with hers.

"Wow." Stunned green eyes stared down into his. "This is…totally unexpected. And really hot."

"*You're* really hot. For the first time in my life, I'm pretty sure having sex with a beautiful woman is a bad idea." He kissed the inside of her thigh. "But I can't resist doing it anyway."

Her fingers drifted into his hair and kneaded his scalp. He purred in pleasure. "That was actually a pretty romantic thing to say, Alexei. In a fucked-up kind of way."

"Who knew it was in me," he teased.

"You're not normally so charming?" she asked with a dubious arch of her brow.

"I don't usually have to use charm at all."

She sighed and shook her head. "Yeah, just whip out that cock and they probably stampede. It must be pretty wonderful for a guy to be so gorgeous that women just fall into bed with him."

"It's pretty wonderful if the woman he wants does that. Otherwise, it can be annoying."

Briana laughed. "Now you see why I wanted you to beg for it."

"You've got me on my knees, sweetness." Cupping her ankles, he slid his hands up, following the graceful curves of her legs. "You're in great shape."

"Yeah. With all the sitting around I do, you would think I'd be fat."

"You keep fit on purpose and you carry a blaster with obvious skill. When we ran through Thieves' Cove you moved with me—"

"That was amazing," she interrupted with a smile that would have brought him to his knees, if he hadn't already been there.

Standing slowly, Alex tugged her body against his. Whatever he'd felt for her last night was nothing compared to what he felt for her today. And they were about to have sex—full on sex with his cock buried deep inside her. He knew when they were done he'd be in a lot worse shape. "How much trouble are you in, Bree?"

She swallowed hard and pulled back a little. "Who says I'm in trouble?"

"You trust me with your body." His hands cupped her breasts, squeezing the firm flesh gently. "But not your secrets?"

"Don't worry about me. I can handle it," she breathed, her eyes drifting closed as his thumbs brushed across her nipples.

His palms tingled, then burned as her skin warmed to his touch even through her tee. "Perhaps I want to help you handle it."

"Perhaps I want you to stop talking and just handle me."

Alex fought the urge to bare his fangs, to exert his dominance and stake his claim. There wasn't any need to do that. There were other, less frightening ways to make her his. He could inundate her with pleasure. He could join their bodies so completely she wouldn't be able to tell where she ended and he began. "Undress."

Bree's eyes flew open. "What?"

"Take. Off. Your. Clothes."

She snorted. "Shouldn't you do that?"

"Certainly." He shrugged out of his flight vest.

"I meant, shouldn't you do that to *me*?"

"If you want to wear that sexy outfit again," he said gruffly, dropping his trousers, "I suggest you do it. If I touch you, I'll shred it."

"Oh." Her gaze dropped to his cock like a magnet to metal. She licked her lips. "You think I look sexy?"

Damn. It drove him crazy when her tongue darted out like that. Pretty soon he was going to feel that lush mouth slick and hot around him. “Hurry,” he ordered. “And I’ll show you what I think.”

He’d never seen a woman strip so fast in his life.

“You know,” Bree grumbled, hopping on one leg to get out of her shorts. “In romance novels, the hero slowly undresses the heroine and it’s totally erotic.”

“Then they fuck and the heavens open up and stars explode and galaxies collide.” He snorted and stepped closer. “The real thing is better.”

Her voice was muffled by her tank as she pulled it over her head. “For men, maybe.” She tossed the shirt aside and shook out her curls. “You guys always get off.”

Alex gripped her by the waist and stepped forward until he’d pinned her to window. He paused a moment, taking in the view of her naked upon the backdrop of black space and sparkling stars. Then he spun her around so she could see too.

Briana squirmed between his body and the glass until he bent his knees and slipped his cock between her legs. “Oh hell…” Her voice was a breathless gasp. “I think a star just exploded.”

Inclined to agree, he nuzzled her ear and breathed in her scent. “Let’s see how much damage we can do.”

Chapter Four

Bree shivered as Alex's voice, low and seductive as sin, brushed across her ear and echoed in her mind. Behind her, the heat and hardness of his cock burned between her thighs. The feel of his muscled chest pressed to her back made her wet. The chill of the glass, in stark contrast to his warmth, made her nipples hard. "You feel awesome," she told him, thinking he should know that.

His hands slipped upward and cradled the curve of her breasts. "You know," he said, his voice husky, "I don't have any jobs lined up after this run." He pulled her away from the glass and fondled her nipples. Rolling them with his fingers, he pinched and tugged until she whimpered with pleasure. "I could stick around and help you out."

"Oh my God. How can you think at a time like this?" She was having trouble even breathing.

"I'm thinking about you. Everything I do is about you. Trust me."

Leaning her flushed cheek against the glass, Bree closed her eyes and willed away the emotion she had no business feeling. "You're being romantic again, damn it."

Alex's chuckle made her ache all over.

"Let me turn around." She wanted desperately to get her hands on him.

"Lesson Number Two in patience—when a vamp has a hard-on like I do, you don't want to incite him further."

The softly menacing tone to his voice made her so hot, she writhed against him. "Why not? I'd love to see you lose control, get a little wild, turn things—"

Bree gasped as two sharp points scraped along the top of her shoulder. She stared at his reflection in the glass and saw the deadly glint of his fangs and the laser brightness of his gaze.

"*That's* why," he said softly, staring back at her. "One hunger feeds the other. Left unchecked, the man you know will give way to the animal you don't. I won't risk hurting you."

"Wow, I can see you."

"No, I'm making you see me. I don't want you to freak out."

"Oh, Alex…" Something inside her turned all soft. He was hiding the very essence of who he was, because he didn't want to scare her. "You make me want everything you can dish out. Try me. I can handle it."

With infinite care and a reverent touch, his palms slid down her rib cage and between her legs. He parted the lips of her sex and slipped through the moisture there. "No. You can't. You're human—soft and sweet and fragile. You've never seen a vamp male in full territorial rut or you wouldn't be asking for it."

"T-territorial?" God, that sounded sexy as hell. She spread her legs and moaned as he slipped a long finger inside her and then another, stroking deeply, just where she ached for him. She'd loved this last night, the feel of him inside her. Even this small little bit of him made her feel less empty, less alone.

"Yes. I'd want to mark you, claim you, make you mine. I'd frighten you, because I wouldn't look the same. I'd be larger and far more powerful. One wrong move and I could kill you. I could drink too much from you, fuck you too hard, cut your satin skin. It wouldn't be me in control anymore, Bree. I wouldn't know what I'd done until it was over."

"So you only fuck vamps then?" The sudden image of him with another woman made her grit her teeth.

"I didn't say that." Alex rubbed the heel of his palm against her clit making her pussy clench hungrily around his pumping fingers. "Damn, you're tight."

"Then what's different about me?" she argued even as her legs wobbled precariously. "I'm not weak."

He tightened his grip to support her. "I didn't say that either. I'm the one who's weak, sweetness. I haven't wanted a woman this badly in…well, in forever." He licked across the fluttering pulse in her neck and he shuddered, his thrusting fingers working faster, making her cream. "You have no idea how badly I want to pin you to the floor, and sink my cock and fangs into you. I've never been territorial with anyone, but I would be with you. I can feel it."

"You've never…? *Ever*?"

"Never ever."

His softly spoken words were devastating. Suddenly this wasn't about sex anymore and everything between them changed in the space of one breath. Things she'd never thought to offer any man became necessary gifts.

"Do it," she dared, the image of him straining over and inside her body making her impossibly wetter. "Take what you need. I bet I could handle it." Her voice wavered. "I-I want to handle it."

Alex growled as she soaked his hand. "You don't know what you're asking for."

"I'm asking for *you*, all of you. Don't hide a part of yourself away from me."

He nuzzled against her with a low moan. "Arch your back and brace yourself."

"Here?" she croaked, his rough command taking her to the brink of orgasm.

His fingers withdrew and she moaned in protest. Gripping her hips, he lifted her feet from the floor, stealing her balance. She squealed as her palms hit the window and the broad head of his cock breached her. She barely caught her breath before he lowered her onto him, the awesome width and hardness of his shaft pressing relentlessly into her.

"Ah fuck." His arms shook as he took a step forward, using the weight of her body to drive himself deep. Her feet couldn't touch the deck, he was so much taller than she was, but he held her aloft with the effortless strength of a vampire.

Bree hissed and clawed at the glass as she seated fully onto him, his heavy balls resting against her clit. "My God! Did your cock grow overnight?" Writhing in an effort to accommodate his size, she was so painfully acutely aroused she thought she was losing her mind.

"Does it hurt?" he gasped, his lips brushing over her shoulder in a tender caress.

"God, no. It feels wonderful."

"Yes… No, don't move. Hold still. Give me a minute."

"Please," she begged as he remained completely still, his damp cheek resting against her shoulder, his chest heaving against her back. She reached behind them and tugged at his ass. His tight, taut, gorgeous ass.

"Bree… Damn it!" Alex caught her wrists and pinned them above their heads, holding her body above the floor impaled on his cock.

"Are you trying to kill me?" she complained, her pussy quivering around him, desperate for some friction. She curled her feet around the back of his knees, trying to find the leverage she needed to ride him.

Finally, he began to move in short, hard digs, rubbing more than thrusting. She came immediately, the pleasure moving outward from the place where he filled her, curling her toes and tensing her frame. Her cunt tightened around him in rippling spasms as she cried out his name and struggled against the slick glass.

"That feels fantastic," he groaned, switching to a faster pace. "Keep going."

As if she had any choice. The blissful waves of orgasm rolled and crested, easing slightly only to return in greater force as he swirled his hips and plunged deeper. So deep. Without her arms or her legs, she could only take what he gave her, her body helpless and spread for his slick rhythmic drives.

Lacing her fingers with his, Bree held on, clenching her inner muscles as he shafted her in long lunges.

"Oh yeah," he breathed in her ear, sweat from his skin binding them together. "You're making me come." He shuddered, his cock swelling before he spurted in hard, powerful bursts, flooding her so full she cried out in orgasm with him. Harsh sounds of pleasure tore from his throat, guttural and unbelievably exciting.

"Alex…" She closed her eyes as her body went languid, boneless in the wake of his infusion of heat. And still he kept going, pumping his cock through their mingled cream. "Don't stop. It feels so good, I'll die if you stop."

"I won't," he promised hoarsely, maintaining the slow, deep fucking, his shaft still hard as steel. "Now that the edge is off, I can do this for years."

He released her hands and thrust hard. "Hands and knees."

She gave an incredulous laugh. "How the hell am I supposed to do that?" She couldn't move. Besides, they were vertical.

"Trust me, sweetness. You have to learn to trust me."

His hands moved quickly, so quickly it seemed one moment she was standing and the next she was positioned just as he'd wanted. Dropping her head, she looked between her spread legs startled to see the floor a few feet below them. "Wow."

"Ummm," he agreed. "Now I can really take you deep."

Briana stared for a moment in shock, her body rocking as he began thrusting steadily. Her eyelids grew heavy as he stroked deep inside her, rubbing against places no man had ever touched before. She barely moved, arrested by the sight of his straining thighs and heavy sac as he pumped into her with a languorous, seductive tempo. It was so damn erotic watching him fuck her, her cunt fluttered around his cock as he swiveled his hips and screwed deep into her.

"Like the view?" he purred, his fingertips drifting along her spine.

"I like *you*," she admitted. Too much. Far, far too much. Alexei was such a blatantly sexual creature, she couldn't help but adore him.

Maybe even more than adore him.

It's okay, sweetheart.

"It's so *not* okay."

I adore you too.

"Damn it," she complained, her eyes misting with tears. "You're getting romantic again."

* * * * *

Romantic.

That wasn't the way Alex was feeling at all. Possessive and needy, maybe. Hungry and horny, definitely. But romantic?

Briana moaned his name and his gut tightened. *Ah hell, who was he kidding?* Romantic was frighteningly accurate. It was only the depth of his affection that allowed him to keep the hunger repressed and under control. His fangs ached and power rippled beneath his skin, but he restrained them all with a tight rein, because his feelings for her were stronger than the animal within him. In over two hundred years, he'd never been able to say that about any other woman.

She thrust downward against him, taking all of him, and he shuddered at the feel of the slick lips of her cunt kissing the base of his cock. Her creamy heat closed around him like a velvet-gloved fist. He'd just had the orgasm of his life, but you couldn't tell now. His cock was swollen to painful proportions and his balls were threatening to crawl inside his body.

"Easy," he growled when she began to rock hard, directing all of his energy into keeping them suspended above the deck of the bridge. It was the only way to keep the

hunger occupied so he could make love to Bree like she deserved, slow and tenderly, instead of fucking the hell out of her.

She made another soft whimper and he cursed, the need to orgasm rising every time he sank into her. Her thoughts, hot and sexy and filled with fondness for him, drove him mad. Her fingers clawed at the glass, leaving damp trails of sweat behind. "Make me come again," she pleaded. "I'm going crazy."

Curling his body around hers, Alex shortened his strokes and reached between her legs. He circled her clit with the pads of his fingertips and groaned at the feel of her slick with his seed.

"Yes…" Bree swiveled her hips in time with his tempo, her cunt rippling along his shaft before clenching tight around him. Pure pleasure centered at the base of his spine. His cock filled with lust and desire before exploding in release, draining him of all the emotional barriers he'd set in place between them.

* * * * *

Taking care not to wake her, Alex slid his arm from beneath Briana's head and slipped quietly out of bed. He stared down at her for a long moment, taking in the gorgeous way she was displayed on his linens. Lost in a sea of blood-red satin and jewel-toned pillows, her pale skin and golden curls made his mouth water.

He was tempted to lean over her and steal a kiss, an act he'd successfully managed to avoid so far, but he knew already that a taste of her would lead to a hunger for more. His animal would awaken and want her blood, want her cunt, want her body writhing beneath his, completely at his mercy. He couldn't take the chance that he'd hurt her. Not for anything in the universe.

With a sigh, he forced himself to step away. He tugged on a pair of trousers and left the room. Padding softly down the corridor, he made his way to the bridge and sat down at his console with its multicolored lights. Alex took a moment to think, his brain

gradually clearing of Bree's addicting scent. Then he hit the comm and waited for Derek to answer.

The screen lit up almost immediately, revealing the stern countenance of the Security President. "How's everything progressing, Night?"

"As well as can be expected."

That answer sounded better than, *I'm falling in love with my mission, how about you?*

"Has she told you anything?"

Not a damn thing and that was really starting to bug him. It meant there was a trust issue between them. Not that he blamed her with the information she had, but he was arrogant enough to wish that whatever she felt for him would be enough to get past it. He'd got what he needed by probing her mind, but he wished she'd had the faith in him to tell him her troubles out loud. "They want her to withdraw her support of the Eastern Bill."

Derek frowned. "Why? It's a minor piece of legislation that doesn't hurt anyone's interests. If I remember correctly, it just calls for opening a remote sector of the Gamma Quadrant for travel."

"Apparently there is a small colony of nomads in that sector who display remarkable regenerative qualities. They can cut off a limb, let it die, then reattach it and it will regain its function."

"Shit." Derek fell back in his chair. "I take it Representative Michaels hopes to open the route to researchers?"

"That's the plan. Briana thinks if they can determine how the regeneration works, they can regenerate the reproductive systems of vamps. She knew opposition would be high if her true intent was revealed so she's kept it under wraps."

"Well, someone figured it out," Derek growled. "I'm really starting to feel out of the fucking loop here. I went through every report on Rep. Michaels and the only droid purchase I could find was a sex bot a few weeks ago."

"That's the one I was talking about."

"You said a PA droid."

"That's what she's using it for," he grumbled. "She's had its programming altered."

Derek threw his head back and laughed. "What I wouldn't give to be on that ship! I've never mixed it up with a sex bot and I sure as hell wouldn't let one anywhere near Sable, but the idea is intriguing. You can tell me all about it and I'll live vicariously through you."

Alex snorted. If anyone even looked at Sable wrong, Derek got pissed. Alex had always thought that kind of protectiveness was funny. Now that he was on the possessive side himself, it wasn't such a laughing matter. "That damn droid is in the cargo hold where it belongs. It's lucky I didn't eject it, like I have half a mind to."

"Uh-oh. Sounds like somebody's getting attached," Derek chimed in softly. "Don't forget she's human, Night. The fact that she's not a vamp helps our cause immeasurably. There's no future with her. You're immortal, she's not."

"I know that." But it was too late to stop the way he felt about her. He suspected he'd been half in love with her before they'd even met. The heat, the need between them…hell, *the mind-blowing sex* had finished him. "How's her family?"

"Fine. For now. Listen, Night, are you planning on telling her who you are? She hasn't notified anyone about the threats to her family, including her own personal guards. She obviously didn't trust anyone to assist her. Are you certain she trusts you?"

No, he wasn't certain and he hated that. "I won't jeopardize the mission, sir. I know what the risks to her are if she handles this alone."

"Don't discount the risks to our kind. We need her."

Alex took a deep breath and willed away the frustration that ate at him. "I know."

"Good. I trusted you with this assignment. Don't fuck it up by getting emotionally involved. Understand?"

"Yeah," he bit out. "I understand."

"I don't have the schematics on the sex droid readily available, but I'll get them to you in an hour. And your hunch was right about the would-be assassin. A traveler bearing a Shinite passport went through Thieves' Cove port the same time you were there."

Alex kept his face impassive, but inside him everything changed. Shinite assassins didn't fail. The blaster shot in the bar had either been intended as a warning or it was only by a whim of fate that Briana was alive today. Either way, she was in deadly serious danger and that knowledge solidified his next course of action.

"I've got all my security safeguards on their highest levels," Alex said grimly. "But I'll run through them again every day. I won't take any chances with her life. And you were right about her dad. He's hidden himself away at her request. Even she doesn't know where he is."

"Good. That takes care of that concern. Tap into the droid at your first opportunity. We need to know everything it knows. Atkinson out."

Derek signed off and the comm screen went black.

Alex double-checked the navigational settings and did a quick sub-space scan, before rising from his seat and heading back to Bree. In a little over a week they'd be in Tolan. Somehow he had to make her fall in love with him before then. She had to trust him implicitly or the mission could fail, and he couldn't let that happen. This wasn't about doing his job anymore or impressing Derek. This was about Briana and protecting the woman he cared about more anything.

His heart ached as he entered his room where the scent of sex and her skin inundated his senses. If she grew to love him, it would rip him apart to say goodbye to her. But he'd suffer the pain gladly if it kept her and her family alive.

* * * * *

"Ugh! Get off," Bree complained. "You're crushing me."

James rolled to his back beside her on the padded mat. “We should continue this another time, Mistress. You are too distracted to fight properly.”

“I am not distracted.”

“You have yet to knock me down and we have been sparring for hours.” He stood and held out his hand to her.

She blew the hair out of her eyes and then brushed the strands away that clung to her sweaty skin. *Alex. Alex. Alex.* He was all she could think about and it was affecting everything, including her ability to concentrate.

“I’m just not used to fighting in artificial gravity,” she muttered, using his proffered help to pull up to her feet. “That’s all.”

“Your excuse is dreadful,” he scoffed.

“Bite me.”

“That’s a pleasure I reserve for myself,” Alex said behind her. Startled, Bree spun swiftly to face him.

He lounged in the doorway with his arms crossed, the picture of seductive leisure in his sapphire-colored vest, loose trousers and bare feet. He looked like he’d just rolled out of bed, which he had. Since she started sharing his quarters a week ago, she’d learned another thing about vamps—they slept like the dead. He hadn’t moved a muscle when she’d slipped out of his cabin earlier.

His dark eyes never left hers. “Send that thing away. I’ll spar with you if you like.”

She snorted. Alex was never going to accept James. He’d been furious to discover she’d reactivated her droid and it had taken a hefty dose of carnal persuasion to cheer up her vamp again. “Sparring with you won’t help me. You have abilities I can’t compete with.”

“Then send it away and we’ll get our exercise in more pleasurable ways.” He pushed off the doorjamb and came toward her with a sultry stride she knew. *Let’s fuck,* it said, and she always responded immediately.

"You're a menace," she grumbled as her body shivered in anticipation, her breasts growing heavy, the nipples beading up tight. She'd wanted hot sex and orgasms with a gorgeous guy and that's exactly what he gave her. But she hadn't expected Alexei Night to be so tender. She hadn't known he would want to be with her as often as possible, that he would want to feed her by hand, wash and brush her hair, hold her close while sleeping…

What did *you expect?* His voice, low and throbbing with something that made her sweat, curled in her mind and the way he looked at her made her breath catch. *Did you think I'd only pay attention to you in bed?*

"You said you didn't have to be charming."

He arched a brow and came to a stop before her. Lifting his hand, he brushed the backs of his fingers across her damp cheek. "I don't *have* to be anything, sweetness. But I choose to be everything for you."

"Why?"

"Because it gives me pleasure to do so." His firm lips brushed along her eyebrow. The sex appeal so innate to his kind was magnified in Alexei. She could almost breathe it in, almost taste it.

Bree lifted her face for his kiss, but he licked the corner of her mouth and then moved away.

She groaned in frustration. "Why won't you ever kiss me?"

His hands circled her waist and he stared down at her with a smile. "I thought you wanted to fight?"

"No," she said slowly. "I want you to kiss me."

"Can I choose where?"

"On the lips."

"My thoughts exactly." The wicked glint in his eyes told her they weren't thinking about the same lips.

Shoving out of his embrace, she turned away. “Go walk on the ceiling or something, Alex, and leave me in peace.” She was so sick of the tight control he kept himself under. It wasn’t natural, and they both knew it. Every time they made love—and it was definitely making love—he restrained his baser instincts. Every time they ate, he suffered through stored blood when she would have given hers gladly. His reticence was a barrier between them, a huge one, and she couldn’t live with it anymore.

He sighed. “Bree—”

“Don’t ‘*Bree*’ me! What is it with you and your fucking control? You want a certain level of intimacy and that’s it. You decide the level for you, but you want everything from me.”

“It’s not like that and you know it.”

She rounded on him. “I know you won’t kiss me! Sorry, but to me, kissing is far more intimate than fucking.”

“Mistress,” James interrupted. “I need to speak with you.”

Alex turned. “Get the hell out of here!”

“Don’t talk to him like that,” she snapped, silently ordering James to her room.

“Why?” Alex asked. “I can’t hurt its feelings.”

She shoved past him, intent on following her droid. “Don’t be an ass.”

“Where are you going?” He caught her by the elbow.

“To my room.”

“You mean *our* room?” he bit out.

“No, I mean *my* room.” Bree tried to shake him off. “The one I slept in the first night.”

He drew himself up and loomed over her. “Why can’t you discuss whatever needs to be discussed in front of me?”

Titling her head back, she stared up into his gorgeous face with its tightly drawn lips and intense gaze. His grip was unrelenting. He wasn't hurting her, but neither could she escape.

"Because it's none of your concern, Alexei. You draw the intimacy line at kissing. I draw it at discussing Council business with a criminal."

Bree felt the frustration and hurt ripple through him. Every day she spent with him made his emotions clearer to her. She knew he could read her just as well, even better, since he could read minds and she couldn't.

"What does it matter?" she asked, lifting her chin even higher. "Whatever you want to know, you can find out by eavesdropping on my thoughts."

His jaw clenched. "I want you to talk to me. I want you to share things with me. I want you to trust me."

"Like you trust me?" she challenged, arching her brow.

"Damn it, that's different. I could kill you, Briana, if I'm not careful."

"Perhaps what I have to say would kill you too."

"That would be stretch," he said dryly, "since I'm very nearly immortal."

"In space maybe, where you're surrounded by metal and no suns. Tolan is a whole different world. We have two suns there and one of our largest exports is trees." She watched him run an agitated hand through his hair and released her breath in a rush. Her heart ached. "Any way you look at it, we're from two different worlds."

He shot her a narrowed glance. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Bree waved a hand between them. She had to swallow hard before she could speak. "Whatever's happening between us is hopeless. I want more than you can give. I shouldn't want more, it's ridiculous to want more, but I do. We should just end this now."

Suddenly his grip hurt. "What do you suggest we do?" he growled. "Reach port and say, '*Goodbye, thanks for the fuck of my life*'?"

"I think that's best, don't—*Mmff*…"

Alex's mouth swooped down to hers—hard, expert, demanding. His hands moved to her wrists and held her absolutely still, his head tilting to deepen the angle of the kiss.

Dark, rich and exotic, his flavor flooded her mouth and made her dizzy. His tongue swept past her lips and into the deepest recesses, licking and tasting as if he were starving for her. He wasn't the gentle, considerate lover she'd known the last week. This Alex was harsh, almost brutal, his tongue fucking her mouth in a desperate, frantic rhythm.

Bree sensed the control he wielded and felt the battle that raged inside him. Encouraged, she brushed her tongue past the sharp tips of his fangs and leaned into him, pressing her breasts to his chest, telling him silently to give it to her. *I dare you*, she taunted in her thoughts, her hands cupping his ass and squeezing the firm flesh.

He growled into her mouth, flooding her mind with images of him as a ravening beast and her as a helpless, frightened victim of his lust.

She fought back with her own visions, pictures of her giving as good as she got, taking everything he had and asking for more. Straddling him, taking him, fucking *him*.

His grip on her wrists tightened until it was bruising. *You want a taste of what it would be like?*

Before she could think her reply, he was moving. He ripped at her clothing, razor-sharp claws shredding her shorts and scraping briefly across her skin. She shivered and moaned, his need for her sparking her own for him. With impatient hands, she yanked down his trousers, freeing the cock she couldn't get enough of. Crowding her, he stepped out of his pants, forcing her to take rapid backward steps. Unwilling to give him any advantage, she reached between them and cupped his balls. His snarled response wasn't even remotely human, but she wasn't scared. She could never be scared of him.

Alex pulled her to the floor, his mouth locked with hers. The kiss she'd longed for cut her lips with her own teeth. The palm that cupped her breast squeezed with painful pressure and the hair-dusted thigh that thrust between hers was rough in its intrusion. Locked together, they rolled and strained to get closer, every touch and movement filled with an underlying desperation.

And then with startling suddenness he thrust away from her.

"Go." His breathing was harsh and loud in the padded room. "Run."

"No, damn you." Scrambling to her knees, she crawled toward him. "Don't push me away again."

"Get out of here!" He curled away from her, the skin of his back rippling as he struggled to contain his hunger.

"You stop now, Alexei Night, and I'm going to kick your ass. And don't think I can't do it either. You won't fight back and I'll just keep on punching."

He shot a glare at her over his shoulder, revealing glowing red eyes and bared fangs. Against her will, she shivered.

Last chance… he warned.

Bree steeled her nerves. This was Alex. She knew him. She trusted him. "Bring it on."

Before she could blink he was on top of her. *Open your legs. Now!*

She'd barely spread her legs before he plunged desperately into her cunt, digging deep with that endless length of thick cock. Moaning into his mouth, she couldn't catch her breath, he gave her no chance to adjust. He fucked her like a madman and she could only hang on, her hands clutching his flexing ass as he reamed her with unbelievable speed, spearing her high and hard. Bree writhed beneath him, begging for air, but he dug his claws in the padded mat to anchor them in place and only shafted her harder.

"Oh God…oh God…oh God…" He was killing her with pleasure, forcing her to take it, punishing her for wanting too much from him.

More, he growled.

"W-what?" She couldn't take any more.

His forearms pinned her shoulders down, holding her immobile, and then he rammed into her, forcing her thighs brutally wide so he could thrust deeper. *More!*

She screamed and came hard, her cunt clutching his pumping cock in hard convulsive shudders. Suddenly her mind filled with him, she *became* him. She felt the drowning pleasure he took in holding her, in fucking her, in tasting her kisses. She saw how deeply he craved her and wanted her on every level possible. She saw the respect he held for her and the need he had to protect her. And when he groaned into her mouth and flooded her with his cum, she saw something else too, something that filled her with equal parts joy and despair.

Alexei loved her.

Oh God…

But there were dark parts to him as well, hidden parts that he refused to show her. Despite the depth of his affection, it wasn't enough. Tears slipped past her lashes and salted their kiss.

He ground into her, stroking his cock with her spasming depths until he'd emptied himself. Then he pulled his mouth from hers and stared at her with torment in his eyes, his chest heaving with labored breaths.

"I can't give you any more than I have." His voice was hoarse and raw as he pulled out of her deliciously bruised pussy. Leaping to his feet, he tugged up his pants and kept his gaze averted. "I've already given you everything." He turned on his heel and left her there on the floor.

Devastated.

Chapter Five

Briana stumbled down the corridor, her hand running along the cool metal wall to support her weak legs. It wasn't love. It couldn't be. Not so soon. They hardly knew each other.

But the reckless beat of her heart called her a liar and the dizziness that accompanied her gasping breaths said the same. Alexei couldn't deceive her about something so important. Could he? Before she'd begun this journey she'd been certain she knew everything about vampires, but she'd been wrong. She didn't know if they could lie through a mental link. It wasn't something she'd needed to know. Until now.

The door to her old room slid open silently and she stepped inside.

"I have news to share," James said quietly.

Wrapping a towel around her waist, Bree walked over to the bed and sank onto the edge of the mattress. Her hand fluttered to her heart as awe sank into her consciousness. Alexei Night loved her. And that scared the shit out of her.

"You have received another demand." James took a seat next to her.

"What?" She turned to face him, thoughts of Alex driven from her mind. "What did it say? What do they want? Oh God, my family… Are they okay?"

"Mistress, calm down." He placed his hand over hers. "They have done nothing to your family, but they know your sister and brother-in-law are staying on Rashier 6."

"No…" She'd arranged a trip off-world for them, taking great care to hide their departure. Using a generic name, she'd purchased a private service to transport them. She'd told them she wanted to hide them from the media attention brought on by her position, but all her efforts had been for nothing. They'd been discovered anyway.

"What do they want?" she asked starkly, her pulse racing in near panic. If anything were ever to happen to Stella she didn't know how she could bear it.

"They know you are en route to Tolan and they are not pleased that you have disobeyed their request for you to wait for instructions."

Bree stood and began to pace. "How they hell do they know that?"

James rose to his feet. "There is an information leak somewhere, Mistress. It is the only logical explanation."

Throwing her hands in the air, she shot him an arch glance. "No one knows, James. You and me, that's it!"

"Night knows," he said softly.

She stilled, astonished. "Oh hell, give me a break! Alex wouldn't sell me out."

"Why not? Because he says he loves you? A known criminal who has spent years doing unsavory acts for money?"

"You don't know him," she argued, even as her stomach turned.

"Neither do you. A week's acquaintance is all you have to base your conviction upon."

"In most cases I would agree that isn't long enough." Bree resumed her fevered pacing. "But he's shown me things, shared things…"

"Has he shared with you the reason for the ten-minute gap in my memory banks?" James asked.

Scowling, she stopped pacing again. "What the hell are you talking about now?"

The droid stood stoically, his classically handsome features impassive. "I hesitated to tell you, because I did not want you to doubt my ability to perform. But in light of the recent demand, I have to disclose the anomaly. There is a ten-minute period of time three nights ago that I cannot account for."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I have run multiple queries and while my database appears undisturbed—"

"Then don't worry about it," she dismissed. "What was the demand?"

"I am unable to account for ten minutes, forty-three seconds," he continued obstinately. "Exactly the amount of time it would take to download all of the information I have acquired since you purchased me."

Her hand moved to her stomach, which suddenly felt queasy. "Is that what happened? Have you been tampered with?"

"There is no record of a download in my database, but I was curious." James moved to the door and locked it. "So last night while you and Captain Night were sleeping, I searched the bridge. I found a synapse interrupter, Mistress. It was set at just the right frequency to disengage me. None of the other droids or programs on this ship would require that particular frequency."

"Oh God." Swallowing hard, Bree shook her head, refusing to believe it. James was designed to see only the facts. He wasn't capable of factoring in the effect of emotions. Alex would never set her up. He would never hurt her so badly.

"What other explanation is there?" James asked.

"I don't know. But there has to be one."

"The message was very clear. Your exact location is known to them. They are aware that we will enter Tolan orbit in a few hours. They insisted you leave Captain Night behind and land on the planet alone. From there you have been instructed to travel to a local public transport hub near your father's home where you will receive instructions by public comm link. You are to leave this ship without delay and await their approval before taking any further action. You are to dress in the clothing that displays your rank and present yourself as you would on the House floor. You are to go into the hub without my escort and—"

"This is too much," she snapped, her hands going to her hips. "These nitpicky demands are simply designed to oppress and frustrate me into doing something stupid.

They asked me to back off the Eastern Bill and I agreed. I'm not giving them any more than that."

"You never intended to give them even that much," James pointed out. "You merely made the appearance of capitulation until you could ensure your family's safety."

"Damn straight! I won't be dictated to. If I give in once, what's to stop them from demanding more? I'll be trapped in a vicious cycle, nothing more than a pawn used to achieve their ends."

Bree clenched her fists. Despite her frustration, she was going to do as they asked. She'd never spoken to them directly before and she couldn't pass up the opportunity. This situation couldn't be allowed to go on indefinitely. Talking to them would bring her closer to discovering who was behind these threats.

Moving to the round window, she stared out at the starry space beyond. Only days ago she'd enjoyed a similar view, drenched in pleasure as Alex made love to her that first time, moving inside her with breathtaking skill. She'd wanted the moment to go on forever, the joining to last beyond the temporary physical rapture. Known for her pragmatism, that was the one time in her life when she'd lived for the moment.

Now that moment was over. It was hard to believe when Alex's cum was slowly leaking down her thighs, but there was no denying it. He was a vamp with an endless life. She had another fifty years left, give or take a decade if she wasn't assassinated first. And he couldn't be himself with her anyway. What kind of life could they have if he was always living with only half of himself?

She took a deep, shuddering breath and rested her palms on the ledge. The metal was cool to the touch and soothing, reminding her that some things were solid and unmovable in a world that was suddenly careening around her.

Snorting, Bree rested her hot forehead against the cool glass. She'd lost her focus for a while and allowed a seductive vamp to distract her from a matter of grave importance. She'd thought this task would be so easy—hide her family, thereby taking

away the leverage of the people who threatened her. Then she could approach them on equal footing. Once her family was safe, she'd have nothing to lose.

But they'd outsmarted her somehow. Now it was time for her to outsmart them.

"How far away are we from Tolan orbit?" she asked, coming to a decision.

"A few hours." He nodded as he read her thoughts. "An excellent plan. I will go and disable the alert systems for the shuttle pod. Captain Night will be unaware when we leave."

"You'll have to keep him occupied for a bit. If he comes near me, he'll know. I don't want to drag him into this."

"Of course. I will take care of him." James unlocked the door and left silently, leaving Briana with her tumultuous thoughts.

It was wrong to sneak away from Alex, she felt it in her bones. But she needed a clear head now, and her sparring session with James had proven what a distraction the vamp was. Alex was never meant to be more than a temporary pleasure—they'd been doomed from the start—and now the present circumstances were too dangerous. She knew he wasn't the one directly responsible for the leak of information, but someone he told was. And after their encounter in the workout room, he'd become a liability she couldn't afford. She cared about him too much to get him involved with this. Who knew what would happen?

Lifting her chin, she moved into the head to take a shower and wash his scent from her skin. As she stepped under the spray, she hardened her aching heart and steeled her resolve. She hadn't reached her level of power by wavering or allowing her emotions to rule. She'd always relied on her wits to survive.

And if she could stop thinking about Alex, maybe she could actually use them.

* * * * *

Alex awoke to the headache from hell. His hand reached up and touched the rapidly healing bump on the back of his head while his senses searched for Bree's presence. He paused, frozen with his hand at his nape, his eyes closing as he concentrated on searching every inch of the ship. His heart began to race.

Briana was gone.

Panicked, he leapt to his feet and flew through the corridors. Once he'd ascertained that the shuttle pod was gone, he returned to the bridge and replayed the security video, not surprised to see the damned sex bot/PA bashing him over the head with the blunt end of a synapse interrupter. Alex growled. He really hated droids and his inability to sense them or read them.

Dropping his head back against the headrest, he closed his eyes as pain lanced outward from his injury. Was it his love that had caused Bree to flee? He'd felt her surprise like a tangible thing and knew he'd frightened her. But they were almost to Tolan. The pressure had been on him to win her trust before they arrived at the planet and she tried to leave him behind.

He knew now that he should never have left the training room like he did. Had he been thinking clearly, he would have known she would be fragile after the brutal way he'd taken her. And a woman used to treading a difficult path alone would find the thought of relying on someone too scary. He should have set aside his own vulnerability to be there for her. Instead, he'd been equally distraught and arrogant fool that he was, he'd wanted her to come to him.

Because of his stupid pride, the woman he loved was now out there in danger without him. His worry was such that he was near mindless with it. He could barely sit still, barely keep from letting his beast free to tear apart anything that would threaten her safety. He wanted to howl out his frustration, but nothing would save her if he couldn't think clearly.

Alex reached over and hit the comm link. Due to the unusual time of his call, he waited long moments before Derek's face filled the screen.

"What is it?" the president asked without preamble.

He steeled himself before admitting, "Representative Michaels fled the ship with her droid an hour ago."

Derek took a deep breath. "Now she's Rep. Michaels again? You had a fight or lover's quarrel, right? *Goddamn it*!" the president roared, his fist hitting the table. "Where the hell are you?" He looked away to check the readout. "Tolan. I'll notify your backup to begin searching for her. Return to Thieves' Cove and await further instructions."

"I'm not leaving!" Alex protested. "Not while she's in danger."

"You've done quite enough. You transported her to Tolan. Leave the rest to the agents on the surface. Continue to shift through the information you downloaded from the droid and keep me posted."

"I'm not leaving," he said again, his voice softer than before, but no less determined.

Derek arched a brow. "You are if you want to continue working for the STF. Disobey a direct order, Night, and see what happens."

His hands clenching into fists under the console, Alex kept his face impassive. "As you wish, sir. Night out."

He turned off the comm and sat for a moment, considering what he should do next. One thing was certain—he wasn't leaving Tolan without making sure Briana was safe.

He reactivated the comm and a moment later the screen was filled with a blond man with laughing blue eyes. A longtime STF agent, Christian Beaumont was one of his best friends and the only person he trusted to do what he was about to ask.

"Hey, Alex," Christian greeted with a wide smile that made most women melt. "How's it going?"

"Not good. Listen, I need you to do something for me and you can't let Derek find out what you're up to." Alex would lose his job for this, something that up until a week

ago had been the most important thing in his life. But now he had something far more precious to lose.

"Aw shit." Christian groaned. "Are you in trouble again?"

"I'm going to send you some files I downloaded from a droid. Go through them and see if anything jumps out at you."

"Like what? What the hell am I looking for?"

"Recordings of ransom threats and anything at all pertaining to the Eastern Bill. It's a PA droid's database. It should contain your basic PA information. If anything doesn't fit, flag it and let me know. Oh…and you'll be looking these files over on a flight to Rashier 6."

"Rashier 6?" Christian cried. "I've got assignments of my own to do. What do you need on Rashier 6?"

"I'm going to send you some vid captures for visual reference. I want you to find the couple in the photos and guard them. But don't let them know what you're doing." Alex couldn't be two places at once and keeping Bree's family safe was as important to him as protecting Bree herself. He couldn't bear to see her injured, either physically or emotionally.

"Alex, you've got to be kidding. This isn't a favor. This is like 'you owe me your firstborn child' territory."

"I can't have kids, neither can you, but if you do this favor for me that could change."

The blond vamp stilled, his features changing from scowling frustration to alert awareness. "You're serious."

"Yeah. Can you help me?"

Christian nodded. "Send me what you have and I'll take care of it. Take a comm with you in case I have questions or find something you might want to know."

"Will do. I owe you, man. Huge."

"Yes. You do. Beaumont out."

The comm went dead.

Alex stood and left the bridge. He went to his room and breathed deeply as he entered, absorbing Bree's scent into his lungs. Inside him, the hunger stirred as it always did at the smell of her, clawing at his vitals with burning need, desperate for the feel of her beneath him and the taste of her upon his tongue. His mouth watered and his muscles rippled beneath his skin. Alex intended to use his endless craving for her to his advantage. He would track her with it and hunt her down. He'd find a way to keep her safe.

That way, when all was said and done, he could throttle her himself.

* * * * *

Briana stood outside the shuttle pod and gazed at the nearby forest. The brightness of the twin suns was slowly waning as the day lengthened into late afternoon. Tall, green grass grew to her hips. Swaying gently in the fragrant breeze it resembled the rippling waves of water in the lake just beyond the rise. Birds larger in size than she was flew in the air above her in swirling, dipping patterns she remembered fondly from her childhood. Despite the bleakness of her present task, it didn't detract from the knowledge that she was home. It had been a long time since her last visit. Too long.

Shortly the authorities would come to investigate the unauthorized landing, but that wasn't what worried her. The local police could be dismissed with a quick eye scan to verify her identity. It was Alexei Night that gave her the shivers. Vampires were predators. He would be able to track her easily if he wanted. And that was one thing she'd never doubted about him—he wanted. *Badly*.

"Let's get out of here," she said grimly, her fingers finding comfort in the grip of her blaster.

James stepped out of the shuttle and raised the ramp, sealing the craft. "I have everything we need."

They jogged quickly across the packed dirt of the clearing and slipped into the woods, heading toward the public transport hub just a few kilometers away.

As they moved silently through the golden trees, Bree felt occasional brushes of awareness along her spine. Alex couldn't be on her heels yet, there were still a few hours left before nightfall, but she was as cognizant of him as if he walked directly behind her. She quickened her pace.

Some type of tampering had happened to James, she didn't doubt her droid's claim. But why would Alex need to access her PA when her own thoughts were an open book? And who had he been communicating with the last week of their journey? She couldn't see any reason for him to have shared her information with anyone unless he'd meant to profit from it. Despite how well that fit in with his past record and his reputation as a criminal, she couldn't believe Alex would hurt her for credits. She was, however, starting to believe that he loved her. Or maybe she was just hoping he loved her. But if she was hoping for his love, wouldn't the implication be that her own feelings were stronger than she'd acknowledged?

What a fucking mess.

Don't say a word, James, she warned silently.

For once, her droid used his undeniable logic to keep his mouth shut.

* * * * *

Alex hit the catch on his boot and watched as his footwear sealed automatically. Straightening, he arched his neck, adjusting the fit of the scabbard that was slung across his back. His laser sword clung to his thigh and his blaster hung fully charged in the holster at his side. Normally, he wouldn't need anything more than his own physical power, but he had no idea what he was walking into and he had Bree to worry about. He'd need the wooden sword at his back if he had to face off against his own kind, the blaster if he fought a droid and his laser sword—with a massive helping of good fortune—if he fought against a Shinite.

Growling with frustration and unbearable worry, he began to pace. He'd landed on the surface an hour ago, but he had to wait for the cursed twin suns of Tolan to set.

Bree was close despite her three-hour head start. He could sense her. His shuttlecraft's unique tracking signal had made it simple to find and he'd landed at the closest port. It was a public transport hub and they'd protested mightily at his request to land. His ship, the *Renegade*, was a deep-space Starwing, far too large for the design of the simple local hub. He'd had to beg, barter and plead for the clearance to land and in the end it had cost him a case of Anneri wine. The beverage wasn't illegal, but it was very hard to come by and very expensive.

The soft beeping from the bridge told him the suns had gone down far enough that it was safe for him to venture outside. The cargo ramp lowered with what Alex considered to be uncustomary leisure. His booted foot tapped out an impatient staccato as the landing bay slowly came into view.

Outside, beings of all nationalities scurried about their business. Flight information paged from the overhead speakers and various smells assaulted his senses. But the animal within him focused on just one scent—Bree's. She was close, very close.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Alex let the beast free. His fangs descended from their confinement, his nails lengthened into deadly claws, his muscles thickened and bulged. His sense of smell sharpened, his hearing and vision became acute and power visibly rippled beneath his taut skin. It was nearly orgasmic, the sensation of the hunger unleashed. He stepped out into the concourse and all eyes turned to him.

He licked his fangs and smiled.

The hunt was on.

Chapter Six

Pacing in the darkness, Briana drummed her fingers against the hilt of her blaster and surveyed the transport hub in the wide valley below. She'd been waiting for hours for the instructions to come and her patience had long since run out.

"I want you to break into the comm room, James. Tap the lines going into the hub and trace the sender of the link when it comes in." At least with James working toward her cause she'd feel less helpless and more active.

"Of course, Mistress." James cut through the brush and made his way down the sloping hill toward the utility door visible from where they stood.

She watched him move, noting the way he detected the security vids and avoided them. For a sex bot, the variety of his skills impressed her. He was definitely one of the best investments she'd made.

What about me?

Her shoulders stiffened, the hairs on her nape tingling into a singular awareness, as did every cell in her body. She'd known he would come after her, she just hadn't expected it to happen so fast. "You shouldn't be here."

He growled.

"Don't growl at me. This isn't any of your business." Turning slowly, she faced Alexei Night and her mouth fell open at the sight of him. "Alex…?" she breathed, as the surface of her skin misted from a heretofore unknown level of desire. He looked larger, meaner and far more dangerous. The glint in his eyes was feral and voracious.

Damn, he was *hot*! Hard everywhere, he was the most gorgeous creature she'd ever seen. His thick, beautiful hair could have blended with the darkness, except for the loving caress of moonlight that caught the strands and made them gleam like starlight. His dark, liquid eyes glowed a brilliant red, burning through her clothing with a

ravenous intensity. Dressed in his customary vest, his arms and chest rippled with lean power while skin-hugging pants showed off the beauty of his legs and luscious cock.

Her nipples pebbled into aching points and her pussy grew soft and damp, just from the sight of his dark skin burnished with the lunar glow. Fierce, painful arousal flooded her senses in a force so powerful she almost fell to her knees. She moved toward him, unable to do anything else. Delicious memories of their encounter in the workout room made her shiver and walk faster. She was desperate to have him that way again.

"Stay away," came the guttural order.

Glancing at the huge erection outlined by his trousers, Bree licked her lips. He was dressed to kill, literally, and it was so amazingly sexy.

She wanted him. And she would have him. Now.

Alex snarled. "Don't come closer."

The coiling tension radiating from him was a tangible thing. His fists clenched and unclenched rhythmically at his sides while the muscle in his jaw ticced with his effort at restraint.

He was barely in control, she could tell, and it was such a turn-on. Never in her life had she needed anything as badly as she needed him now. She ran the distance between them, determined to rip off the material that hid his body from her view. Her hands grabbed his pecs and squeezed, as she ground her aching pussy against the hard flesh of his thigh.

The next thing she knew, she was facedown on the ground, trussed up like a Tolan fowl.

"Hey!" she yelled, struggling against the bonds that held her. "Let me go!"

"No." His voice was nearly unrecognizable, deep and low and seductive as hell. He moved away and she heard him pacing like a caged beast, the fallen leaves rustling beneath his boots.

"Alexei, please," she begged, her entire body aching and burning for him. "Fuck me."

He came over her, hovering…needing…wanting…just as she was. She could feel the depth of his hunger. *I want to eat you up, lick your cream, drink from you.*

"Please!" she cried again, thrashing restlessly. "I need you."

A low rumbling growl filled the air and then he bounded away.

She couldn't believe it. He'd actually left her. Like this!

Her ears strained for a sound from him, but the forest was still and silent except for the soft nocturnal calls of the various insects and animals that made the woods their home.

Gradually the tightness of her flesh and muscles began to ease, the misty sweat on her skin drying in the cool night air. Only after her breathing returned to normal and her heart rate slowed to a more reasonable pace did Alexei return. She heard the steady, rhythmic crunching of his steps on dried leaves as he approached.

Crouching next to her, Alex brushed away the strands of hair that had fallen free from the tight coil at her nape. "Are you okay, sweetness?" he asked in a soothing whisper.

"I'm tied up on the ground. I wouldn't say I'm okay," she snapped. She glared up at him, noting that he looked like himself again. Just a man. An achingly beautiful man with a seductive smile and tightly leashed power beneath a flamboyant façade.

Alex laughed and made quick work of the ties that bound her. "Good. You sound like you're ready to kill me, which, sadly, is more appropriate at this moment than you raping me. However, please feel free to have your way with me at any another time."

Bree pulled her hands free and pushed up to a seated position. "What the hell *was* that?"

"My calling." He offered a sheepish smile that made her heart skip a beat. "I'm sorry. I can't contain it when I'm hunting. It's instinctive to subdue prey."

"Talk like that is why a lot of humans hate your kind." She wrinkled her nose. "Being called 'prey' isn't very endearing."

He chuckled and held out a hand to help her up. The moment they touched, a hot shiver ran through her. Calling or not, Alex had that effect on her.

"Hell," she grumbled as she was pulled to her feet. "I wanted to fuck you right here, right now, in the middle of waiting for an important comm." She shook her head and snorted in disgust. "I was acting like one of the *Too Stupid to Live* romance heroines in my e-books. You know, the ones that want to fuck right in the middle of the danger and the reader is sitting there going, 'What the hell is she doing?'."

"Um, no," Alex said dryly. "I don't know."

He began brushing the dead leaves off her with gentle hands, his fingers lingering in all the right places. "Sweetness, you really need to stop reading that stuff. If you want some entertainment, just see me. I'll keep you busy."

As if that were possible. She couldn't keep him bound to her and available for her pleasure like James was, although the thought was wickedly tempting. Alex had chosen his path a long time ago, just as she had. Their paths had converged briefly for this voyage, but in the long run there could never be anything lasting between them. She was mortal and he wasn't. He had friends and a life she could never fit into. Which reminded her…

"Alex. Who have you been talking to about me?"

Arching a brow, he asked, "What do you mean?"

"Don't play innocent." She slapped his wandering hands away. "Someone knew we were approaching Tolan and they knew I was with you. I certainly didn't tell anybody, so that leaves only you."

He caught her chin and studied her carefully. Not just her features, but in the deep recesses of her thoughts. "You trusted me." The pure pleasure on his face made her breath catch.

She sighed. It really should be illegal to be that yummy.

Thank you, sweetness. I think you're pretty tasty, too.

"While I'm sure reading minds is a neat trick if you're the one who has the ability," she mumbled, uncomfortable with how deeply he affected her. "On my end, it sucks."

"Whatever," he said dismissively. "All women want men to read their minds. You're damn lucky to have me. Eventually you'll realize that."

He made it sound like they had a future. Bree bit her lower lip to hide the giddy thrill his words gave her, but the glimmer in his eyes said he knew.

"Despite the suspicious evidence to the contrary you never once thought I'd sell you out." His smile was brilliant, the brush of his fingertips along her face reverent.

She was captured by the moment and his obvious relief, her mind twisting and turning in an effort to make sense of her riotous feelings. Crazy wild thoughts swirled through her head. There had to be a way for her to explore these emotions. How could she go on, wondering what could have been between them if she'd only given them a chance?

"You shouldn't be here." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't want you here."

"I know," he said agreeably, "and I love that you—a human—want to protect me, a vampire. Bashing me over the head and leaving me behind was actually a pretty romantic thing to do, Bree. In a fucked-up kind of way."

"Don't tease, Alex. This is not your fight."

"The hell it isn't. You're involved, that means I'm involved."

"I can't think when you're around," she complained, squelching the flare of pleasure his words gave her.

"You can't tell me that you don't feel better with me here." *You can't lie to me.*

A bright pinpoint beam of blue light cut through the trees.

"It's James," Bree whispered. "It's time."

"I know." Alex's thumb brushed across her bottom lip. "You're nervous. Don't be. Your family is safe."

"What?" She stared up into his beautiful face and knew without a doubt that the vamp was not only telling the truth, but he was also crazy about her. Something inside her melted.

Feel that?

"Yes." He was there, in her thoughts. A warm, loving, comforting presence.

I'll be with you the whole time. You let me handle the muscle, okay?

"I didn't hire you to go this far, Alexei. I don't want you hurt or injured. I-I couldn't bear it."

He lowered his head and took her mouth. The desperation in his kiss, the deep licks of his tongue, the shaking hands that cupped her face… It all broke her heart. She leaned into him, aligning her curves to his hardness, sharing her heat with his much cooler body.

I hate this, Bree. I can't bear to have you in danger. I wish there was another way. Any other way.

But there wasn't and they both knew it.

She pulled back reluctantly. Then following the urgings of her heart, she surged against him again and pressed a lingering kiss to his lips that said all the things she couldn't find the words for.

I love you, he replied, his voice husky and raw in her mind.

She left him, brushing tears from her lashes.

As Briana made her way through the brush to the hub below, she had the portentous feeling that something horrible was going to happen. And though Alex tried to reassure her, she knew he felt it too.

Chapter Seven

Alex watched Bree move with graceful efficiency down to the busy hub while the hunger within him howled at her loss. His fear for her caused his chest to heave with labored breaths and nearly destroyed his sanity. The woman he loved was walking straight into danger and he could only stand here, helpless.

Her thoughts and affection echoed in his mind, filling his heart with both joy and despair. She didn't love him, not like he loved her, but the possibility was there and he tucked that tiny promise close to his heart. If they could get through this mission, he'd find a way to be with her. Whatever the cost.

Closing his eyes, Alex sensed the other vamp corps agents around him, but the Shinite assassin, if he or she was down there, remained focused and therefore undetectable.

Briana was out in the open. Dressed in the trappings of her rank, she stood out and made an obvious target. There were built-in shields in her official garment, which would protect her from most indirect blaster fire, but it would never stave off the full assault of a laser sword and she had no protection from a direct shot to her head. His only comfort was the thought that she would be useless to them dead. Perhaps the attempt in Thieves' Cove had simply been a warning. He had to believe it was, because if he didn't, there was no way in hell he'd let her go down there.

Shaking off the foreboding that wouldn't leave him, he studied the buildings below. The transport hub was built in the universal design—four outlying concourses with an open-air center courtyard easily reached by any of four intersecting pathways. On planets with more dangerous atmospheres, the courtyard would be covered in UV-deflecting glass, but Tolan was known for its fresh air which was maintained by the

abundance of golden-treed forests. It was a beautiful world and one he'd like to explore with Bree.

With that thought in mind, Alex slipped through the brush and leapt to the nearest rooftop. From his vantage in the darkness, he had an unhindered view of the brightly lit courtyard below. Crowds milled around Bree, who waited by the row of public comm links. He released the hunger to heighten his senses. He tuned out the steady paging of flight information and heard only the quickened rate of Bree's breathing and the rapid thudding of her heart.

His gaze raked restlessly over the people and he stiffened as several stopped to speak with Briana, whose public persona slipped over her with ease, despite the situation. Before his eyes, she changed from the passionate beauty he knew so intimately into a reserved politician, but whatever guise she wore he loved her just the same. What a fascinating woman she was, cut with so many facets, a person he admired more than any other being in the universe.

Despite his unwavering attention to Bree and the people conversing with her, in the back of his mind Alex maintained the awareness of the other agents assigned to back him up. They moved among the busy throng undetected. Like him, they didn't know what to expect. Because they were vamps, they were as cognizant of him as he was of them, and they queried him about why he was there and what he was doing. He brushed them off impatiently.

Pay attention to Michaels, he growled.

The comm closest to Bree began to beep and she excused herself from her admirers. Alex's muscles tensed so tightly with fear and apprehension they ached.

Something wasn't right. The tiny hairs on his nape stood on end and an icy sweat misted upon his skin.

As she picked up the phone, he caught a fleeting glimpse of a blue laser sight as it brushed over her golden chignon.

His heart nearly exploded in his chest.

Get down! he yelled as he drew his blaster and leapt from the roof.

His body stretched out and flew through the air, rapidly traversing the distance between them. In mindless horror he saw Bree turn toward him in surprise and the brilliant blue light settled directly over her heart.

The blood roaring through his ears made hearing impossible. Alex released an inhuman scream of agony as the light grew brighter and then flashed, leaving behind a gaping hole in her chest. The gap between them lessened with torturous slowness and he could only watch as she crumbled before him…

The moment before he was engulfed in a net.

Bound and helpless, he crashed to the ground. He howled, his claws ripping through the netting in his panic. Bree lay a few steps away, unmoving as her precious blood flowed freely from her wound to stain the stone floor of the courtyard.

"*That's the vamp assassin! Tranq him before he escapes!*"

Sharp stings pelted his thigh. Once. Twice. His pain and rage escaped in cries that rent the air while frightened travelers scattered madly, leaving him alone with the woman he loved so desperately. Unable to look away or reach her, Alex was arrested by the sight of Briana, her beautiful face still and pale in repose. Lost in anguish, he scarcely registered the local authorities who fired tranquilizer darts at him from several meters away.

While Bree lay dying with no one to care for her.

He fought the net like a man possessed, but the more he struggled the more tangled he became. His vision faded, his muscles grew weak. He reached for her mind and found nothing but darkness. Inside him the despair was killing him, his heart so shattered he wished he could die.

"He matches the description exactly…"

"…a known criminal and smuggler…"

"…tip came in about an assassination attempt…we'd hoped to prevent…"

"She's not going to make it…"

"We're losing her…"

Alex sank into hell with a vision of blue laser light burned in his mind.

Chapter Eight

"How did you know?" Derek asked.

Alex stood at the window of the Council embassy on Tolan, and took in the view of the brightly lit city and the night sky above. The horror of the previous week's events would be forever burned onto his memory. He simply wanted to crawl between sheets still scented of Bree and sleep forever. An eternity without her was far too agonizing to consider.

"The blue laser," he replied in a choked voice. "The droid used it earlier to signal Briana in the woods. When I saw it again I realized James had to be responsible. I'm glad I got that thought across before I lost consciousness."

Derek spun his chair around to look at him. "Beaumont was able to track the droid programmer through the database files you forwarded to him. The woman responsible for corrupting the sex bot was apprehended last week, not long after the altercation in the transport hub."

Swallowing hard, Alex's hands clenched into fists. The authorities had shot him so full of tranquilizers he'd been asleep for a week, preventing him from personally seeing to the capture of the culprit responsible for Bree's death.

"The programmer is a member of a relatively small faction of vamp haters. Apparently, when she realized who she was preparing the droid for, she seized the opportunity of a lifetime. She programmed the sex bot to kill Michaels in a way guaranteed to shed no suspicion on herself. From there the droid took over. It chose a vamp to blame and picked a busy public venue—like Thieves' Cove and then the transport hub—so there could be no doubt that you were responsible. The plan would have worked if you'd been the criminal it thought you were."

"Can I go now?" Alex asked, his voice hoarse. Who the hell cared about the droid or the bitch who programmed it? Ever since he'd woken up, all he'd wanted was to be left alone to grieve. Instead he'd been ordered to see Derek immediately.

"I need to discuss your next assignment. I'm transferring you to—"

"I don't fucking care, Derek!" he shouted, turning away from the window. "She's dead. I don't care about assignments. I don't care about the corps. I don't give a shit about anything." He stalked toward the door.

"Night. Damn it! Wait a minute."

"Go to hell, Atkinson." Alex slammed the door behind him.

His vision blurred as he ran with inhuman speed and endurance from the embassy to his ship. His heart throbbed with a sharp, endless ache and he screamed out his agony as he flew through the golden-leafed woods. The beast within him howled and clawed to get out, and he released it with relief, eager to tear apart anything that got in his way. He leapt from tree to tree, his claws sinking easily into the solid bark, marking his trail with scars that mirrored the ones on his heart.

He wanted off this planet, this place that Bree had called home. He wanted to pick a fight with someone, anyone who had the skills to end his misery. And he knew just where to go to make that happen.

Reaching his ship, Alex leapt inside before the ramp finished lowering. He landed in a crouch and took a deep breath, his nostrils filling with the scent of his lost love. Surrounded by cold metal, the memories of Bree warmed the space—echoes of laughter and throaty cries of pleasure that drove him insane.

Bree! he cried, shuddering with the depth of his pain. He felt her so keenly here, in the place where he'd loved her.

Following his instincts, he flew down the corridor and into his room. He leapt onto the velvet-draped bed and paused, his senses bombarded with the lingering essence of Briana. Closing his eyes, he pictured her loveliness spread across his sheets—the wild blonde curls on red satin, the sweetly parted lips that knew just how to please him, the

heavy-lidded eyes that begged for more…he could almost hear her giggling as he tickled her and her smart-ass comments when he teased her…he could feel her hands on his skin, caressing and kneading…

In such a short time, they'd shared so much. Lost in bittersweet memories, he was openly vulnerable and completely unprepared for the tackle that came from behind.

Astonished, he reacted without thought, rolling across the large bed and pinning his attacker. Fangs fully bared and eager for a fight, he snarled, ready to kill. Instead he froze in shock.

"*Bree?*"

The momentary hesitation was all she needed. Throwing her leg over his hip, she twisted, taking the advantage. Beautifully naked, she straddled him and smiled, her beloved face framed with riotous golden locks. Dumbfounded, Alex glanced at her chest and saw the healing, fist-sized scar above her left breast. He touched it hesitantly, consumed with guilt that he'd failed to protect her.

"Hi, baby," she said in a soft, breathy voice.

And then she bit him with her fangs.

Alex arched upward and hissed as the temporary discomfort melted into heated lust and endless relief. His cock swelled painfully, filling with his need for her.

Bree! He crushed her to him with pure, unadulterated joy while his stunned mind struggled to make sense of it all.

She was a vamp. Like him. Not gone. Not lost. But wonderfully, vibrantly, marvelously real.

Hush, she soothed, undulating her lithe body over his, rubbing the hard points of her nipples across his vest-covered chest.

How?

One of the other agents saved me. I'd lost so much blood, it was the only way.

No one told me.

President Atkinson commed me when you left his office. He thought you knew.

As she fed, she replayed the events of the past week in his mind while her soft silken hair brushed across his cheek. Awed by the feel of her, Alex arched his throat into her suckling mouth.

I love you, he moaned, intoxicated by the smell of her and the delight of finding she was not gone forever.

She lifted her head, licked her fangs and arched a wicked brow. “I trust you to protect me, Alexei. I want you to know that. You’re assigned to me now, as my personal pilot and guard.”

Alex swallowed hard and shook his head. “I failed you.”

“No, you didn’t. You defied a direct order and sent your friend to protect my sister. No one could have done any more than you did.” She smoothed his brow. “I won’t take ‘No’ for an answer.”

“Oh, hell,” he breathed, a single tear slipping down his temple. His hands ran restlessly up and down her thighs. “Tell me I haven’t succumbed to grief-induced delirium.”

“Nah, you’re not crazy,” she said, her fingertips drifting across his chest and teasing the flat points of his nipples through his vest. “But I wouldn’t mind if you got a little wild. I’m a vamp now. I can take it.”

He reached up and brushed her curls back. “How do you feel about that? You seem to have taken to feeding without any trouble.”

“You’re yummy, babe. I’ve always thought so.”

“That’s nice to know.” Alex studied her features intently and searched her mind. She was putting on a brave face and trying to play it off, but she was still adjusting mentally and physically to the drastic change in her lifestyle. His love brushed across her jumbled thoughts soothingly.

Sighing, she sat back and settled over his aching cock. “Well, the way I see it is, I have this gorgeous vamp who just happens to have fallen in love with me.”

“Lucky girl.”

“Yes, I am. However, there was a slight caveat.”

“Oh?”

“See, he was destined for an eternity of heart-stopping hotness and I… Well, I was going to turn into a wrinkled old hag. Sucking blood was the least I could do to keep him interested.”

The tip of his finger slid down the valley between her breasts. “I bet he would love you anyway, no matter what you looked like.”

Bree’s eyes turned soft and liquid with adoration. “You know,” she murmured in a husky voice. “I think he would have.”

“Damn straight.” He lifted her palm to his lips. “But I’m still not reassured. What about your career?”

She shrugged. “I was pretty solidly situated in my seat and being a vamp won’t change that. PR-wise, it’s not as newsworthy for a vamp to champion the vampire cause as it is for a human to do it, but oh well. I am what I am.”

“And I love what you are,” he promised her. “I lust for what you are. If you need to talk about it though, I’m here. Becoming a vamp is a big transition, sweetness.”

“I know.” Her nose wrinkled. “But let’s talk about you right now. You were pretty upset when you came on board.”

“I thought you were dead.”

“You got it for me bad, don’t you?”

“Really bad. Horribly bad.”

Briana sighed. “You know for a guy with your reputation, you’re awfully romantic.”

“Shut up and kiss me, and then let me fuck you senseless. Is that better?”

She grinned. *First, you'll have to catch me!*

And the next instant she was gone.

Alex blinked at the spot where she'd just been. "What the hell?" he shouted, rising on his elbows. Damn it! She'd been naked in his bed and—

You'll have to hunt for me, Alexei.

Why? he grumbled. *Haven't I been through enough already?*

You should have told me you were STF.

But then the droid would have known, he said defensively.

Yes, yes, I know. But it was driving me mad trying to think of ways to keep you.

Awwww, Bree. That's so sweet.

I've got something sweet for you, baby. Right here.

He growled. *Are you sure you're ready? You've got to be a little weak.*

Are you scared? she taunted.

Are you kidding? He rolled from the bed, and shucked his trousers and vest. *I'm horny. And hungry.*

Come and get it then.

Leaping to the ceiling, Alex closed his eyes and let the hunger loose.

It burst free with a roar of triumph. Strong and powerful, it wanted its woman, wanted the taste of her on his tongue and the feel of her hot, tight cunt gripped like a fist around his cock. Crawling over the doorjamb, Alex moved down the corridor, following the scent of Bree's potent arousal. He took his time, silence being the key.

What's taking you so long? she complained.

Miss me?

I thought you'd be all over it.

Oh, trust me, sweetheart. I will be.

Undetected, he hovered over where she crouched in the padded training room. Bree chewed her lower lip and grumbled impatiently. He rolled his eyes. She had so much to learn about hunting and hiding.

Without warning, he dropped gracefully beside her.

She screeched in surprise. “How the hell…?”

“Gotcha!” he cried, triumphant.

Before he knew what hit him, she’d tossed him over her shoulder and was running down the corridor. “Nope. *I* got *you*.”

“Hey!” he protested, laughing.

“You took too damn long. I’m horny.” Bree threw him on the bed and pounced over him.

“Ah, back where we started.”

“Yes, but now you’re buck naked.”

His mouth curved as his entire being filled with happiness. “What are you going to do about it?”

Her flashing red eyes revealed her hunger. “Finish what I started.”

“Yum.”

Briana bent her head and licked his nipple, her eyes closing as if she savored the taste of him. “Ummm… Definitely yum.”

“Do that again,” he urged.

She turned her head and her hot, lush lips enclosed his other nipple. Her tongue swirled and he gasped in pleasure, wishing desperately for her to perform the same service to rest of him.

Anything you want, she purred. Her taut, ripe breasts scraped across the ripples of his abdomen as she slid down the bed. *This mind-reading trick comes in handy, eh?*

The head of his shaft leaked its enjoyment as her breasts caressed the length of his cock. “Oh, man,” he breathed. “I found a new favorite pleasure.”

Her hot, wet tongue licked the drop of cum off the head of his shaft. He jerked and then shuddered as sharp needles of desire fired along his nerve endings.

"You're such a sensual creature," she murmured, her breath gusting across his skin in delicious torment. "It's one of the many things I love about you."

Alex closed his eyes at her words and sank farther into the pillows. His heart swelled as she took his cock deep into the haven of her mouth and suckled just the way he liked it. "Ah, sweetness." He groaned from deep in his throat. "You do that so well."

Humming, she caressed his length with her lips and then sucked him back inside. She repeated the movement, over and over, making him pant and clench the coverlet with grasping fists.

"Tell me you're wet," he gasped, on the verge of coming.

It wouldn't take much, she assured him.

Clutching her shoulders, he lifted her off him, her mouth leaving his cock with a wet popping sound.

"Oh," she cried as he flipped her and buried his face between her legs. "Oh *wow*."

Spreading her with his fingers, Alex dipped his tongue deep into her cunt. Her scent and flavor burst upon his senses in blinding brilliance, the added dimension of her vampirism appeasing the restless need of his hunger. She was hot and slick and quickly drenched, flooding his mouth until he groaned in desperation and ground his hips into the mattress.

"I-I'm wet now, Alex."

Are you ever.

"Uh…you can…you can stop now…and…oh hell, don't stop…" Bree arched her back. "Oh Alex…"

She came then, shivering beneath him, and he rose above her and thrust his cock deep into her grasping depths.

He shuddered at the silken feel of her and held himself still, gritting his teeth as she milked him in orgasm. Only when the tight tension of her tiny frame relaxed did he pull his cock out and then plunge in again.

Her nails scraped his sides and the quick stab of pain, combined with the heat of his lust and the depth of his love, broke the bonds that restrained his baser needs. He'd thought he'd lost her and now she was here, speared with his cock, mewling his name as he fucked her hard and deep. He growled and the rumbling warning had her eyes flying open in startled arousal.

"Yes," she encouraged, her voice raspy and low. "I can take it."

Alex pinned her hips, released his fangs and with all the hunger he possessed, claimed her body as his own to pleasure, his fangs sinking deep along with his cock.

The moment her blood flooded his mouth, he came. The taste of her life spilling down his throat spurred an orgasmic rush that threatened to kill him.

Screaming his name, writhing and scratching, Briana was more than enough for him, almost too much for him. What he'd thought would be a claiming was instead a matching. A joining of two beings destined one for the other.

Briana arched into his bite and wrapped long, lithe legs around his thrusting hips, meeting him stroke for stroke. He took her like an animal, his skin drenched in sweat, his aching erection unflagging despite the rapture of his release.

So much smaller than him, she was a damned tight fit, but she was built for his cock and took everything he gave her. Then begged for more. Sobbing and pleading, she demanded everything he was and he entered her mind with a rush of affection.

I love you, he cried with every cell in his body. He stiffened and roared, flooding her with his seed and his love until there was nothing more he could give her.

She fell with him into orgasm, hugging him close, and Alex felt that tiny promise within her flare into something far more powerful. A sentiment strong enough to take his fear and grief and her wary reticence, and banish them forever.

* * * * *

Later, tangled in the sheets and snuggled at his side, Briana turned her head and kissed his cooling skin.

Alex hummed, awash in contentment. He was exhausted and looked forward to sleeping with the love of his life in his arms.

“Awww…” She sniffled. “You are so romantic.”

“I’ll stop if you like.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“If it bothers you—”

“It doesn’t.”

“I wouldn’t want to—”

“If you quit, Alexei, I’ll dump you. I swear.”

“Well, we can’t have that.”

“No, we can’t have that at all.” She sighed and hugged him tight. “Promise me there won’t be any more secrets between us.”

He hugged her back hard. “I promise, sweetheart. There won’t be anything between us. Ever.”

It was silent for a while and then Alex said, “Bree?”

“Umm?”

“No more sex bots. Okay?”

“Could be interesting.”

“No.”

“Wouldn’t you—”

“No. I wouldn’t.”

She laughed and his heart swelled at the sound. “I wouldn’t either, you know. You’re more than enough sex for me.”

The compliment spoken in her well-sated voice stirred him again. “Does that mean you’re done for now?”

“I thought you were sleepy.”

“*I* am. But another part of me is not.”

“Ooohh… I love that other part.”

He gave a mock pout. “Just that other part?”

“Well, more than just that part,” she conceded, tossing a leg over his hips.

“Don’t keep me in suspense,” he groaned. “What else do you love?”

“It would take me forever to name everything.” She bent at the waist and kissed him, long and hard and wet and deep. He held her to him, her breasts to his chest, her hips to his, until she pulled far enough away to say with a smile, “Lucky for you, that’s exactly how long we’ve got.”

Sylvia Day is the multi-published author of highly sensual romantic fiction set in historical and futuristic settings. A former Russian linguist with the US Army Military Intelligence, she now writes full-time. When she's not working on her next erotic romance, you can find her chatting with visitors on her weblog, message board and chat loop http://groups.yahoo.com/group/SylviaDayBookCafe.

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